ISSN 0970-5260

Panjab University
Research Journal (Arts)

Volume LVI No. 2 July - December 2025

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ISSN 0970-5260

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Indian Hindu Diaspora in the United States: Connects and Continuity

ABHISHEK SRIVASTAVA

Abstract

The Indian diaspora in the United States of America represents one of the most dynamic examples of transnational migration in the modern world. Beginning in the late 19th century, successive waves of continued migration have resulted in a substantial presence of the Indian Diaspora in most fields in the USA. At the same time, it is also important to acknowledge that the Indian diaspora encountered a range of structural, social, political, and cultural challenges before it could establish itself. An unintended consequence of the ever-growing and expanding Hindu diaspora is its influence on the evolving diplomatic relations between India and the USA.

The objective of the paper is to explore and analyse the migration trends of Hindus to the USA, the challenges they encountered, and the institutions that emerged to address these challenges. Drawing on the constructivist approach of analysing engagement between different cultures, supported via institutional mechanisms, this study adopts a qualitative content analysis method to address its research objectives. The study is based on secondary data, including newspaper articles, policy documents, annual reports, and archival records. This article is a part of an ICSSR Major project on the impact of Civilizational factors and culture on foreign Policy, especially in terms of Hinduism on the society and culture of the United States.

Keywords- India-US relations, policy advocacy, Hindu diaspora, civilizational influence, cultural diplomacy

Indian Diaspora in the United States of America: An Overview

From its modest beginnings in the early 20th century to its current status as one of the most affluent and influential immigrant communities, the trajectory of the diaspora reflects broader transformations in global migration patterns, U.S. immigration policies, and India's own political and economic developments. Examining this history is crucial to understanding both the internal evolution of the diaspora and its strategic significance in contemporary Indo-U.S. relations. The concept of diaspora extends beyond mere migration. While migration refers to the movement of individuals across borders, diaspora implies the creation of a collective identity rooted in shared origin, sustained networks, and enduring links with the homeland (Safran, 1991; Cohen, 2008). In the Indian case, this process was neither linear nor uniform but unfolded in phases shaped by distinct historical conditions. The study of the Hindu diaspora in the United States, therefore, requires attention to both continuities, such as the persistence of cultural traditions and community networks and structural shifts, including changes in occupational patterns, settlement geographies, and modes of political engagement.

It is also worth noting that Hinduism in America manifests in diverse forms that scholars generally categorised into two overarching types: immigrant Hinduism, representing the traditions and practices of Indian Hindus who have migrated to the U.S., and export Hinduism, which refers to reformulated spiritual movements tailored for Western audiences (Fenton, 1988, 60; Larson, 1994, 196–97). Gerald James Larson (1994) classifies Hinduism in the U.S. into six types: secular Hinduism, practiced by those who may be culturally but not religiously observant (Fenton, 1988, 60); cultural Hinduism, which emphasizes participation in rituals for cultural rather than theological reasons; non-sectarian Hinduism, which downplays denominational divisions; bhakti or devotional Hinduism, rooted in sectarian worship; neo-Hindu movements, such as the Vedanta Society; and guru-internationalist movements, like the Self-Realization Fellowship,

which target global audiences (Larson, 1994, 196–97; Jenkins, 2000, p. 92).

An early channel for Hindu ideas in America came through literary and philosophical engagements in the 19th century. The Transcendentalists, for instance, found inspiration in Hindu texts like the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads (Jenkins, 2000). The Theosophical Society later expanded awareness of concepts such as *karma* and *yoga*. A turning point came in 1893 when Swami Vivekananda addressed the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. He portrayed Hinduism as inclusive and spiritually profound, catalysing the establishment of enduring institutions such as the Vedanta Society and later the *Ramakrishna Mission* (Eck, 2000). In the early 20th century, Swami Yogananda's Self-Realisation Fellowship promoted yoga and meditation to a Western audience. His universalist approach resonated with seekers beyond the Indian diaspora, helping to build Hinduism's visibility in the American spiritual landscape (Jenkins, 2000). Later, the Immigration Act of 1965 significantly altered this landscape by abolishing racial quotas and facilitating the entry of professionals, particularly educated individuals such as physicians, engineers, scientists, and business professionals (Kurien, 2004; Fenton, n.d.). Hindu immigration to the United States following the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act caused a significant demographic and cultural shift in American society. The influx of highly skilled Indian professionals and their families created a crucial demand for spaces that could facilitate religious rites and, in turn, cultural identification.

The second generation of Hindus in the US had their own set of challenges, which required both their inner will and institutional support to be resolved. Second-generation Indian Americans' cultural and religious identities have been greatly influenced by Hindu spiritual institutions. These young people frequently manage two identities by striking a balance between the standards of mainstream American society and the expectations of their immigrant parents. Temples provide a space for them to balance these frequently opposing needs, creating what academics have dubbed

"hyphenated identities" that combine aspects of Indian and American culture (Maira, 2002; Shukla, 2003). Young Indian Americans develop a complex sense of self that encompasses both their ancestry and their modern reality by participating in cultural workshops, working at festivals, and forming peer networks within the temple.

Civilizational Factors connecting Hindu Diaspora to India

India's foreign policy has frequently been viewed through the lens of contemporary geopolitical agendas, security concerns, and economic objectives. Civilizational Learnings and culture have played a very significant role in shaping Indian foreign policy. Having a rich ancient tradition and values, it has been blessed with assets that give it leverage over other countries in facilitating the development of strong bonds with them. Since the post-independence era, from *Panchsheel* to the non-alignment movement, to its stance on the non-proliferation treaty, all have had their roots in various philosophies of the ancient past. Ancient religious texts, such as the Mahabharata, Ramayana, Vedas, Smritis, Aryankas, Tripitakas, Agamas, Nikayas, and Dharmashastras, as well as secular texts like the Arthashastra and Nitisara, written by philosophers across different ages, have served as the basis or a directive for the framing of Indian foreign policy. In light of these, with a specific focus on the role of religious leaders in cultural diplomacy, the study aims to analyse the increasing influence of Hinduism in the United States. From ancient rulers exchanging presents to modern cultural celebrations, the role of culture in diplomacy has been significant in showcasing a nation’s identity, asserting power and nurturing international relationships.

In general, a civilizational identity is a collective cultural, intellectual, and historical consciousness that shapes a country's perspective (Tharoor, 2018). Taking cue from this, it can be aptly stated that India’s identity is built on millennia-old traditions such as *dharma* (righteousness), *ahimsa* (nonviolence), *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* (the world is one family), and pluralism, among other such ethos. Such notions have influenced India's

foreign policy, which has shifted away from being driven by realpolitik-based approaches (Bajpai, 2021). The realpolitik approach views foreign policy as a zero-sum game, rather than a win-win scenario that benefits the maximum number of people. The approach of India embodies cultural and ethical values shaped by principles such as non-alignment, multilateralism, and strategic autonomy, which are deeply rooted in its civilizational character (Hall, 2019). India has also been influenced by its strategic culture, defined as a set of shared beliefs, norms, and practices that drive its security policies and diplomatic behaviour (Tanham, 1992).

Several theories that have attempted to explain the behaviour of nation-states in the international political sphere have often chosen to view soft power and cultural tools as complements to hard power. Realism, which keeps national interest at the centre stage, has barely recognised any significance of culture and its role in facilitating relations between the two countries. Liberalism focused on building institutions to streamline global affairs and make progress. Similarly, constructivism and other theoretical perspectives have not placed significant emphasis on the role of culture. Only a few scholars in the field of International Relations, which is often seen as a realm of hard power, have given importance to culture as part of Soft power. Neoliberals like Joseph Nye are one such who, while conceptualising Soft power, mention the importance of Culture. While foreign policy has been perceived as driven by realpolitik thinking, cultural exchanges and civilizational engagement are often considered desirable but non-essential. However, in the era of globalisation, cultural diplomacy is emerging as an indispensable tool in shaping international relations. Many Western nations strategically incorporate cultural diplomacy into their public diplomacy efforts, recognising its profound ability to shape and positively influence long-term public perceptions and relations between nations.

India's foreign policy, rooted in its civilisational heritage, combines antiquity and soft power to navigate an imperfectly globalised world.

Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain thought-based *principles, such as Vasudhaiva Kutumbakum, ahimsa, dharma, and non-discrimination,* define its diplomatic personality and soft power, as much as the age-old contradiction between idealism and pragmatism, strategic autonomy and moral responsibility. Through cultural diplomacy, renewing Buddhist pilgrimage circuits, internationalising the Ramayana epic, and increasing the popularity of yoga, India has solidified links between Southeast Asia and the West, countered counterinfluences, and established itself as a defender of the well-being of all human beings. Diaspora festival celebrations and Hollywood-style movie plots of harmony and power are the foundation for this vision of pluralism, establishing people-to-people bonds. Regionally, policies such as Act East and Neighbourhood First use common histories with ASEAN, Nepal, and Sri Lanka to establish stability, balance China, and position India as a cultural stabiliser. Internationally, its push for climate justice, disarmament, and multilateralism is evident in the International Solar Alliance, the Lifestyle for Environment movement, the "no first use" nuclear doctrine, and UN peacekeeping, infusing both ancient ecological knowledge and a vision of an inclusive world order. However, strategic bilateral ties with authoritarian governments for energy or security requirements, as well as the politicisation of cultural narratives at home, risk diminishing India's pluralistic credibility. Meeting strategic requirements while being ethically aligned is the greater challenge to maintaining India's moral leadership, ensuring that action, not just rhetoric, ensues from its vision of itself as a *Vishwaguru.*

The concept of *dharma* highlights duty, justice, and moral order, which translates into a desire for ethical diplomacy where power is exercised with a sense of responsibility (Subrahmanyam, 2020). Mahatma Gandhi-derived ahimsa shaped Indian foreign policy after independence, reflecting a rejection of colonialism and a commitment to conflict resolution through non-violence (Narlikar, 2017). India led the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and championed disarmament. The ancient Sanskrit dictum "vasudhaiva kutumbakam" underscores the nation's vision of global

interconnectedness and unity, as reflected in its commitment to multilateralism and active engagement with the United Nations (UN), the G20, and BRICS (Bajpai, 2021). India's vision has diverged from Westphalian visions of unadorned sovereignty by prioritising cosmopolitanism and a cosmopolitan ethos of shared humanity.

Internationalism within Ancient India was characterised by trade, sea, and cultural links uniting the subcontinent with Southeast Asia, Central Asia, the Mediterranean, and the rest of the world. These transactions were not only economic but also served as channels for philosophical, religious, and artistic exchanges, fostering a cosmopolitan worldview. Indian Ocean trade routes connected ports such as Lothal, Muziris, and Tamralipti to Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Rome, and spices, textiles, gemstones, and ideas were exchanged. Archaeological finds such as Harappan seals in Sumerian sites attest to 3rd-millennium BCE trade routes (Kenoyer, 1998). These interactions followed the diffusion of Indian spiritual traditions, mostly Hinduism and Buddhism, which made lasting cultural contributions.

Indianization in Southeast Asia was achieved through borrowing Sanskrit, Hindu-Buddhist symbolism, and forms of government in Funan, Champa, and Srivijaya, among others. This "Indianization" was a natural process, driven by local elites being awed by Indian society (Mabbett, 1977). Indian-style Angkor Wat temple complex in Cambodia represents Indian religious and architectural features translated into local contexts (Higham, 2001). Buddhist monks and merchants on the Silk Road traversed Central Asia, building monasteries at Khotan and Dunhuang, and disseminating Indian texts and philosophies (Sen, 2015). The Upanishadic dictum of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (the world is one family) guided this diffusion with respect and interdependence (Thapar, 2002).

India's civilisational strategy is expressed in the nation's historical engagements. India practised cultural diplomacy with Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East during the Mauryas and Guptas with regard to the spread of Buddhism and economic exchange (Thapar, 2002).

In the medieval era, engagement with Persian, Arab, and Central Asian civilisations was syncretic, promoting pluralism. The practice is repeated when India engages with the Islamic world amidst geopolitical stressors (Hall, 2019). In contemporary times, Jawaharlal Nehru made foreign policy based on civilisational values institutionalized. His non-alignment vision was India's age-old resistance to bloc politics (Subrahmanyam, 2020). India's Universalist support for decolonization and anti-apartheid was inspired by its colonial past and commitment towards justice. In contemporary times, India's foreign policy remains an extension of its civilisational ethos with pragmatic variations. The Neighbourhood First Policy emphasises amicable relations with South Asian countries, representing the traditional idea of *mitra* (friendship) (Bajpai, 2021). India's alignments abroad with the United States, Russia, and France need to be weighed between idealism and national interest (Narlikar, 2017). India's adherence to nonviolence and diplomacy needs to be tried in the backdrop of increasing geopolitical tensions with China and Pakistan. Civilisation language being politically deployable is argued, which leads to tensions between professed values and real policies (Tharoor, 2018). For instance, whereas India advocates world peace, it is also a top weapon importer in the world, contrasting its lofty ideals with tough security requirements.

Hindu Organizations and Institutions

The challenges faced by the Hindu diaspora in the US led to the evolution of a series of Hindu-inspired movements, such as Transcendental Meditation and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), as well as the Sathya Sai Baba movement, which gained traction during the 1960s and 1970s (Fenton, n.d.). Official Hinduism refers to umbrella organizations like the Hindu American Foundation, Federation of Hindu Associations, and the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America*. Such groups represent Hindu interests in political and legal forums, advocate for civil rights, and challenge academic representations of Hinduism (Kurien, 2004). They have successfully secured symbolic recognition, such as the

opening of a U.S. Congressional session by a Hindu priest in 2000, and protested the exclusion of Hindus from national interfaith events (Kurien, 2004). Moreover, these organizations often align with Hindu nationalism in India. The major challenge that Hindus faced was to strike a balance between assimilating into the foreign culture and preserving their cultural identity intact. Hindus in the US had to adopt a very vibrant approach in this, as being more assertive of their culture would likely draw hatred towards them from the local population. At the same time, it was also important to practice and believe in their own faith. This led to the development of certain institutions around them for the protection of their culture and not creating hatred towards them, as other religious minorities had faced.

The first wave of institution-building was typified by temples such as the Malibu Hindu Temple (1981) and the Sri Venkateswara Temple in Pittsburgh (1976). The buildings' architectural adherence to Indian temple designs and incorporation of cultural features like classrooms, libraries, and community halls highlighted the organisations' dual religious and cultural purposes (Eck, 2001). These institutions institutionalised the diaspora's ties to Indian heritage by adapting to offer educational programs and youth outreach initiatives. In this direction for moral education, *seva* (service), and cultural continuity were promoted by the *Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha* (BAPS). The *Sri Chinmoy Mission* and *Arsha Vidya Gurukulam* promoted and preserved Hindu spirituality that has attracted worldwide interest. Institutions such as the Hindu Temple Society of North America (HTSNA) and BAPS Mandirs offer structured programs for children and youth aimed at teaching the epics (*Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*), scriptural texts (*Bhagavad Gita*), and Sanskrit chants (Eck, 2001). Additionally, since its founding in 1966 by A.C. *Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada*, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) has built a global network of temples and cultural institutions that combine contemporary evangelical methods with ancient *Gaudiya Vaishnavism* (Rochford, 2007). In addition to daily rituals and kirtans,

ISKCON temples host cultural events that draw both Indian and non-Indian visitors, vegetarian cooking lessons, and seminars on Vedic philosophy (Brooks, 1992).

The Ramakrishna Mission exclusively asks for donations in times of need, usually avoiding direct public requests for money like many other religious organisations do. For instance, contributors received fundraising fliers following the earthquake in Gujarat (Ramakrishna Foundation, n.d.). Despite having a weak online presence, the Foundation's website (which was once housed on Geocities) offers thorough project descriptions, including the $850,000 needed to expand the *Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture* (Ramakrishna Mission, n.d.). Donations made in the United States may be undesignated (to be spent where most needed) or designated (for specific causes). The Indian government must acknowledge the recipients as tax-exempt charity religious organisations. The *Ramakrishna Mission* in the U.S. requires $280,000 to help pay off a mortgage on the Ridgely ashram. The Advaita Ashram in India needs $506,000 for expansion, and the Matri Mandir in West Bengal is seeking endowments for scholarships (Ramakrishna Foundation, n.d.). Contributions support a wide range of activities. The *Ramakrishna Mission* promotes culture in a subtle but long-lasting way. The universal principles of harmony, tolerance, and self-realisation, all based in Indian philosophy but accessible to people from all walks of life, are emphasised by RKM, in contrast to temple-centred institutions. They preserve the spiritual integrity of Indian traditions while bridging the cultural divide through their lectures, Vedanta retreats, Indian arts programs, and festival celebrations. Both Indian Americans looking for a morally and culturally affirming sense of community and educated Americans exploring spiritual alternatives in the post-1960s counterculture found the Mission particularly appealing due to its non-proselytising ethos, philosophical focus, and emphasis on service and meditation.

Furthermore, Hindu religious organisations in the US have carried out a

number of vital tasks of promoting Indian culture to different sections of Hindus via cultural pedagogy. Numerous temples offer organised educational programs, such as Hindu Heritage Classes and Bal Vihar classes, which are run by the Chinmaya Mission. These classes teach Indian languages, classical music and dance, and mythology. This becomes particularly important for Second-generation Indian Americans, who often lack access to such material in traditional school settings and greatly benefit from these programs in developing a sense of rootedness (Shukla, 2003).

Hindu religious organisations in the US have shown themselves to be vibrant and flexible stewards of Indian culture, serving a variety of purposes that go far beyond the religious. These institutions have established robust platforms for cultural innovation and preservation through organised education, group celebration, philanthropy, and identity development. Their contributions to preserving Indian history in the American diaspora remain significant and vital, despite the ongoing obstacles they face in areas such as inclusivity, representation, and political neutrality. These institutions will likely become increasingly crucial in navigating the boundaries between tradition, modernity, and multicultural citizenship as the Hindu American community evolves.

Organisations for Policy Advocacy and Political Awareness

The emergence of the Indian American Impact Fund and the US-India Political Action Committee (PACs) for mobilising resources and funds, which not only advocate for issues pertinent to the diaspora but also for society as a whole (Badrinathan et al., 2024). The PACs and fundraising had a decisive role in the political integration of the community. Community-based PACs, such as the US-India PAC (USIPAC), founded in 2002, have emerged as a key institutional vehicle for supporting candidates, lobbying for policy priorities, and enhancing the visibility of Indian American candidates (Badrinathan et al., 2024). AAPI was established in 1982 to represent the interests of physicians of Indian heritage who are practising in the US. These physicians had migrated from India in the 1960s

and 1970s and encountered difficulties related to professional integration, credential recognition and adaptation to the American healthcare system. It has been effective in spreading awareness and combating discrimination and biases.

HAF was established in 2003, and it claims to be the largest and oldest education and advocacy group of Hindu Americans. The establishment of HAF is an interesting story which brought together the concerns and aspirations of four individuals, all uniting for the cause to make the lives of Hindus in America more comfortable and acceptable to the local community and to strengthen their concerns about dowry (hindumaerican.org, 2025). One of the founders, Mihir Meghani, sought to establish an institution that would address the concerns of Hindu Americans in the public sphere. Aseem, the other member, wanted the media in the US should portray Hindus as they are. In a horrific case of misrepresentation, the local newspaper of Florida represented Hindus as cannibals. Nikhil Joshi, as a student, had grown up in America and found that due to the misrepresentation of Hindus, he was increasingly proselytised by his 11th-grade teacher, so his goal was to keep the people of the local community informed about Hinduism and make them more accepting. Since the basis of making an image of any community in those days was based on their information which students read in their school books, Suhag Shukla was interested in making sure that public schools in their textbooks do not ridicule Hindus for what they are not. She, like Nikhil, had grown up in the USA and had gone through the ordeal where Hindus were depicted inaccurately in high school. In an infamous incident, a teacher during the 9th grade asked her if her parents were saving money for her dowry (hindumaerican.org, 2025).

Through the efforts of these four individuals, who built synergy around their aspirations, the HAF was established. HAF today has dedicated offices, a Board of Directors, a National Leadership Council, and an Advisory Council.

AAPI was established in 1982 to represent the interests of physicians of Indian heritage who are practising in the US. These physicians had migrated from India in the 1960s and 1970s and encountered difficulties related to professional integration, credential recognition and adaptation to the American healthcare system. One of the core pillars of the AAPI is representation and policy advocacy, such as healthcare reforms, immigration issues and Medicare and Medicaid policies. AAPI actively participates in the policy discussion related to these issues at the concerned level of legislature, either centre or state or at both. It has worked to spread awareness and combat discrimination and biases. As of now, AAPIs' membership has grown to 10000 (aapiusa.org, 2025). AAPI has consistently advocated for fairer residency slot allocations and the improvement of H-1B and J-1 visa pathways for South Asian medical professionals, actively shaping both discourse and legislative outcomes in Washington.

Indian American Impact Fund (IAIF), Deepak Raj, an entrepreneur and community leader from Princeton, along with former Kansas State Representative Raj Goyle, created the Indian American Impact Fund in 2016. The initiative was committed to enhancing Indian American political influence, funding Indian American candidates, and empowering the expanding Indian American voter base (iaimpact.org). The Impact boasts Indian American representation in state legislatures by almost 24% by electing 2 new State Senators and 3 new State Representatives. They are the first Indian Americans to hold their respective positions. It has also allocated $2.5 million towards digital, mail, and turnout initiatives in the Georgia runoffs to engage Asian voters.

In 2018, the Impacts leadership and board created strong strategies to enhance civic involvement and aid candidate training, by the Indian American Impact Project and Indian American Impact. In 2018, the organization selected 20 South Asian American individuals at the local, state, and federal levels to pursue political office (iaimpact.org). It’s first

Summit and Capitol Hill meetings brought together over 250 elected officials, business executives, and community leaders to assess the significant advancements achieved and to initiate steps toward creating an even brighter future. Impact also hosted a "Women who Impact" event with U.S. Senator and upcoming Vice President Kamala Harris (iaimpact.org).

A minimum of 120 South Asian Americans campaigned for office, marking the largest figure ever recorded. In 2020, the American elected Vice President Kamala Harris a Black, and female Vice President, which stands as the most notable accomplishment of the Impact in the political history of Indian Americans so far. Within a span of 107 days, during the 2024 elections in the US, Indian American Impact connected with 182,000 Desi voters in these four essential states. Impact conducted over 86,000 phone calls, visited more than 31,000 doors, and sent out over 26,000 hand-written postcards to voters from South Asia (iaimpact.org).

Another important organisation in the direction to promote the well-being of the Hindus in the US is the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad America* (VHPA). It envisions a dynamic and vibrant Hindu society guided by the enduring principles of *Dharma* and the universal ideal of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam,* the belief that all creation is one family. In this vision, it states a dynamic society is one that evolves with time, harnessing and advancing scientific, technological, and artistic knowledge while embodying the timeless wisdom of the *Rishis*. It is envisioned as fearless, strong, and innovative, continuously exploring and validating truth both within and beyond human experience. VHPA states that a vibrant society is characterised by energy, creativity, prosperity, and cultural richness, nurturing art, music, and individual aspirations in an atmosphere of collective confidence and vigilance. The organisation's mission is structured around four interrelated components: *Prachar* (raising awareness), *Seva* (community service), *Samskar* (cultivation of values), and *Sampark* (networking). Under *Prachar,* the aim is to promote unity among Hindus through collaboration with like-minded groups, to represent Hindu interests in various public

forums, and to enhance awareness through seminars, conferences, publications, and media engagement. *Seva* emphasizes humanitarian service to all people, regardless of race or religion, and seeks to build a dedicated network of volunteers for community welfare initiatives. Through *Samskar*, the organization strives to instill self-respect for the Hindu way of life and reverence for Dharma Gurus and institutions, while creating educational opportunities such as youth camps, community centers, and family retreats that transmit Hindu values and heritage. Finally, *Sampark* focuses on establishing global connections among Hindu organizations, temples, and individuals, fostering interfaith dialogue, and mobilizing resources to support the broader mission (dc.vhp-america.org).

Conclusion

The Hindu diaspora in the US has opened new channels of communication between the two countries. Starting from a mere step to improve their lifestyle and work opportunities, the diaspora has brought itself way ahead. Now the Hindu diaspora has reached heights in all the fields, which brings good not only to them and the US but also to India. The theory of Complex Interdependence, which states interaction between two countries at certain levels, including the interstate channel, the trans-governmental channel, and the transnational channel, further states that people-to-people connectivity is a major channel of communication between two countries. The Hindu diaspora has not only created space for its own in the US but is also a serving example of people-to-people connectivity between the two nations. It has evolved into something strong and impressive that their demands and issues remains a priority of the leadership in both countries. The General election in India and leaders visiting the US to address a huge crowd of the Hindu diaspora make it evident that the importance of the Hindu diaspora. The leadership in the US has also maintained a close and cordial relationship with them in order to reap the benefits of their influence and ever-growing numbers. The Hindu diaspora initially faced a series of challenges, from being stereotyped to being seen as an outsider and or confined to blue-collar

jobs. But with the changing times, the reality also seems to change drastically. They faced challenges such as being assimilated in the US to an extent that no one there treated them as outsider, and at the same time, their identity as Hindus was also not to be compromised. They had to keep their cultural identity intact, although with flux from the American culture. In this journey, they were helped by several groups of institutions, some of which helped them to preserve their religious and cultural identity, whereas some worked to strengthen their standing in politics and spread awareness about the achievements and cooperation by the Hindu diaspora. The Hindu diaspora in the US has served as a strategic asset to both the nation state, whether it is India or the USA. There is still a long road to go, where it can be further strengthened on various accounts in India and maintaining more formal and informal ties to harness their achievements for the good of both the nations.

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Panjab University Research Journal (Arts)
VOL. LVI 20-34 (July-December 2025) *ISSN: 0970-5260*

Evolution of Parliamentary Democracy in India: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract

India's parliamentary democracy has evolved through a complex historical process, shaped by colonial influences, constitutional developments, and socio-political movements. This paper explores the transformation of India's governance structure, from early deliberative assemblies to the adoption of the Westminster model post-independence. It examines the role of the British colonial administration, particularly the Government of India Acts, in introducing legislative frameworks and representative institutions. The paper further analyzes how India's independence movement contributed to the demand for self-rule and democratic governance. The evolution of parliamentary procedures, electoral reforms, and federalism in the post-constitutional era are also discussed, highlighting key challenges and milestones. By tracing this historical trajectory, the study provides insights into the resilience of India's democratic institutions and their adaptability to changing political dynamics. Ultimately, this research underscores the significance of India's parliamentary democracy in shaping governance, policymaking, and public representation in the world's largest democracy.

Keywords: Parliamentary Democracy, Indian Constitution, Colonial Legacy, Electoral Reforms, Governance

Introduction

Parliamentary democracy is a system of governance in which the executive derives legitimacy from and is ultimately responsible to parliament, a

principle known as collective responsibility. In the parliamentary system, the party or coalition that is elected into power forms the government and the head of state is usually a different person from the head of government. India's parliament government's shape is based on democratic principles allowing to elect their representatives for firming shape of government and in exercising their rights to vote on their behalf when they meet periodically (elections). The parliamentary system involves balancing interests, accountability, and ways of dealing with unresolved grievances of a political character with constitutional provisions. The importance of outlining the trajectory of parliamentary democracy in India is for understanding the political metamorphosis from the past systems of governance in the country to the contemporary political landscape. The development of parliamentary democracy in India has been impacted by several influences of history including pre-colonial, colonial, and constitutional development in the post-colonial phase. The trajectory of India's democratisation process can inform us about the persistence of India's democratic institutions, the challenges they have faced, and their complicity and capacity to adapt with changes in socio-political relationships. Investigating this shift will be useful in understanding the extent to which parliamentary democracy has assisted in notable advances in governance, political stability, and citizen representation in the world’s largest democracy. This research paper is intended to pave the way for a later analysis that views the historical trajectory of India's parliamentary democracy chronologically: origins, formative events, institutional development etc. It will consider how traditional governance contributed to the establishment of representative institutions, the importation of British colonial systems of legislative government, the role of the independence movement in defining India as a democracy, the framework of parliament as it was established post-independence, major reforms, and major challenges in contemporary India. It therefore assumes a historical and analytical stance, examining and explaining parliamentary democracy in India through the use of both primary and secondary sources, with the aim

of understanding, comprehensively, the development of parliamentary democracy in India.

Ancient and Medieval Governance Traditions

India's governance traditions trace back to the Vedic period, when early democratic institutions such as Sabha and Samiti were significant decision-making features. The Sabha was a group of select individuals, consisting of elders and learned members of society that made suggestions to rulers, and debated and discussed pertinent issues. The Samiti was a larger body and represented governance on behalf of a greater community. Although both institutions are recognizable from a democratic perspective as we approach this idea, they emphasize important tenth century values in early Indian society. Specifically, we want to emphasize the significance of collective decision-making as justified by legal principles. The Mahajanapada period (6th to 4th century BCE) that followed saw the emergence of multiple states, particularly in eastern and northern regions of India, starting to adopt republican forms of governance. These were called Gana-sangha, and have consulted in wider deliberative assemblies consisting of a varied leadership group elected or chosen through consensus to hold leaders accountable. The Lichchhavis of Vaishali and the Shakyas of Kapilavastu exemplify some republican states from this period. They were rūpā and their governance reflected ideas of collective leadership, value in public debate and rule by law mediating governance. Centralized governance was employed by the Maurya (321-185 BCE) and Gupta (4th to 6th century CE) dynasties, but saw the continuation of the advisory councils. The Mauryan system of governance, headed by Emperor Ashoka, was characterized by a concern for social welfare in its policies as well as a system of consultation with ministers and court officials advising the king. Similarly, the Gupta kings relied on councils when making decisions regarding policy. While emperors still held the ultimate decision-making power, councils balanced the power of the monarchy with a system of advice. While councils functioned to provide and carry out policies, local self-governance formed the basis of

governance under the Chola and Vijayanagara Empires. The Chola dynasty (9th-13th centuries CE) had irregular village administration as they instituted a good system of local governance, with local elected representatives taking care of all local affairs. The Vijayanagara empire (14th-17th centuries CE) adopted a similar policy of regional autonomy where local governing institutions played an important function of governance. These systems point to a long tradition of participatory governance in India which was subsequently adapted for the purposes of a parliamentary system suited to democracy.

Colonial Influence and Legislative Developments

India's political and administrative systems were discovered and built up, in many ways, during the colonial period that the British imposed on the sub-continent, but that gave India the groundwork for a parliamentary democracy. The British East India Company established its rule as a commercial concern, but it slowly expanded to a governmental concern over time. The Company had assumed political control over large territories within a few decades from the mid-18th century and it became necessary to establish some formal governance processes. The Regulating Act of 1773 was the first major legislative intervention that the British Parliament made in order to bring the East India Company under parliamentary control. The principle of establishing a Governor-General of Bengal with an executive council marked the beginning of a centralized governmental administrative process. The next major legislation was Pitt’s India Act of 1784, which established a dual system of control with the British Government managing Company business, including control over the constitution of the Company, by way of a Board of Control. These two acts were the beginning of British parliamentary legislation over Indian administration. Along the way there were three Charter Acts in 1813, 1833, and 1853, which progressively moved British control further whilst endorsing, however limitedly, reforms. The Company’s trade monopolies ended with the Charter Act of 1813 but still retained its political power. The Charter Act of 1833 was the first to

centralize governance in India by making the Governor-General of Bengal the head of all British territories in India. The Charter Act of 1853 paved the way for open competition for civil services which curtailed British officials monopoly to some extent and allowed some limited administrative role for Indians. After the 1857 Revolt and the punishment of mutiny, the Government of India Act of 1858 transferred power from the Company to the British Crown in what is now called "direct British rule". Government of India Act of 1919 was the first to provide dyarchy or limited self-government in the provinces. Government of India Act of 1935 was the first to introduce the concept of federation and provincial autonomy, which greatly influenced the material and constitutional development of India. These legislative changes slowly and surely brought about representative institutions and allowed for the shift to parliamentary democracy at independence.

Role of the Nationalist Movement

The Indian nationalist movement has been significant in shaping democratic engagement in the country. The Indian National Congress (INC), established in 1885, has been a central political dialogue platform and framed demands to be self-governing. The INC began as a political platform demanding constitutional reform and reform to administrative procedures, before moving towards complete independence. Political leaders including Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Mahatma Gandhi, and Jawaharlal Nehru would undertake mass movements, with the people demanding governance based on democratic principles, and consequently having a stake in decision-making. The Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919, part of the Government of India Act, established dyarchy in the provinces as a initial step toward self-government. Certain subjects including health, or education, would be transferred to elected Indian ministers, while important areas such as Law, or Finance would remain the responsibility of British officials. However, following the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919 there would be great dissatisfaction illustrated across the country and a

further growing of Indian nationalist sentiment. In 1928, a British parliamentary committee, known as the Simon Commission, was established under the India (Government of India) Act of 1920 to investigate how constitutional progress in India could be demonstrated. This commission was boycotted by Indians, given the lack of any Indian membership or representation. Following the boycott, Indian leaders created the Nehru Report which advocated for dominion status along with fundamental rights and responsible government. The Nehru Report constituted a vision of governance that was useful in subsequent constitutional developments. The Government of India Act, 1935 was significant as it provided for provincial autonomy with an elected provincial government and formed the basis for a federal structure. It also provided for more powers to elected provincial governments. Importantly, the British retained control over some powers and resources, so the 'self-rule' Indians experienced was not true self-rule. The Government of India Act, 1935 was a landmark in Indian constitutional history and constitutionally speaking established the format for governing. From independence, through the ongoing nationalist movement and continual demand for representative institutions, the government of India eventually adopted a model of parliamentary democracy. It was from the experience and struggle for self-governance and constitutional rights that the democratic ethos of India was constructed. The Indian democratic ethos began in the context of bringing citizens into governance with prescribed accounting through institutions.

Post-Independence Constitutional Developments

Following its independence in 1947, India began the task of framing its own Constitution, which would provide democratic governance to the country. The Constituent Assembly, which met on 9th December, 1946, and was headed by Dr. Rajendra Prasad, was significant in the preparation of the Indian Constitution. There was considerable discussion on what was the best form of government and after considerable discussion, India settled on a parliamentary system of government, which would hold both

accountability to the legislature and was elected by the people. India would adopt a parliamentary structure which was based on the British Westminster system, which called for executive accountability to the legislature, a head of state who was separate from the head of government, and a two-house legislative structure. However, India changed the Westminster system to accommodate Indian diverse social, economic, and political conditions (Toor, 2014), therefore creating a greater accountable representation. There are numerous key elements of Indian parliamentary democracy which includes bicameralism with the directly-elected Lok Sabha (House of the People) as the first house and Rajya Sabha (Council of States) as the second house representing states and union territories. It also forms a clear link between executive and legislature, with the Prime Minister and the Council of Ministers accountable to Parliament. The existence of regular elections, oversight and control of the judiciary, and constitutional safeguards secure the stability and continuity of governance. Therefore, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, as chairman of the Drafting Committee was properly aware of all aspects of parliamentary governance, and established how it relates to democracy, the importance of having a legal framework, under which parliament operates, a system to protect law and rights of citizens, and also the provisions of social justice. His thought ensured that that India's Parliamentary system included democratic principles while preserving institutional safeguards from switching to an authoritarian control. The countries constitutional development after independence from British colonial rule established our platform where representative democracy, federalism, or separation of authorities are recognized as the established governing principles. Parliamentary democracy has adapted to evolving times while maintaining to evolve the demands of political representation yet maintains an effective system of governance with public interface for all.

Institutional Growth and Challenges

India's parliamentary system, which began in 1950, has grown significantly over the years. The Parliament of India, which has two houses, the Lok

Sabha (House of the People) and the Rajya Sabha (Council of States), is the primary law-making entity in the Indian political system. The Lok Sabha has members who are elected by the general public, and therefore the will of the people is represented in this house. The members of Rajya Sabha are elected by the State legislatures, which maintains the balance of the central and federal governments. Over time these two houses have adapted their roles, with each house directly contributing to the formulation of policies and laws, and holding its predecessors accountable to the public. The President of India is the constitutional head of the state, but serves in a ceremonial capacity. The President, however, has a great deal of power in terms of being able to influence the Parliament and the executive because the President calls Parliament into session, gives assent to bills, gives money bills and may also appoint the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister is head of the government, and presides over the executive while providing support and guidance to the legislation. The parliamentary system permits the Council of Ministers to be collectively responsible to the Lok Sabha and reinforces the responsible nature of the executive. The reforms made in elections have made a significant difference in expanding political participation, particularly through the development of, and use of, Electronic Voting Machines (EVM'S), reducing the age of majority to vote to 18 years from 21 years (61st Constituional Amendment, 1988), and measures put in place to provide the electorate with greater transparency (such as, mandatory declarations of assets required for candidates). Nevertheless, the issues of electoral malpractice, the spending power in elections, and informed participation of the electorate still remain. The judiciary has been instrumental in interpreting and safeguarding parliamentary democracy. The 1973 case, Kesavananda Bharati, reaffirmed that the basic structure, and ensured that the Parliament cannot change the basic tenets of democracy regardless of its numbers in the Houses'. Similarly, the Supreme Court has protected democracy by intervening in matters related to electoral disqualification, executive trespassing, parliamentary privilege, and the like. There has been a gradual build-up of

institutions that supports and consolidates democracy. Nonetheless, as we see it today, institutional advancements have not helped. Legislative productivity and the efficacy of the House is in serious decline, the disruptions of the House are considerable, and now we see governed by parties polarizing divisions, which keeps us from reaching a more significant articulation of democracy and warrants yet a series of further reforms.

Parliamentary Reforms and Modern Challenges

India's parliamentary democracy has been subject of many transformations to enhance its reformation, but it still bears the hallmarks of contemporary challenges. The most important reform was the Anti-Defection Law (1985), introduced through the 52nd Constitutional Amendment. It prohibited elected representatives from crossing the floor after their election (when the representative is tied to a political party). While it strengthened party discipline, it raised concerns that the law diluted the voice of individual lawmakers and horizontally repressed internal dissent within political parties. Since the 1980s, the emergence of coalition governments in India has radically transformed parliamentary practices. As there were no single parties that obtained a majority after several elections, alliances with regional and national parties became critical to govern. While coalition politics has allowed for enhanced regional representation, it also led to a heightened risk of instability, debilitating the policymaking process, and persistent political bargaining over ministerial portfolios. More recently, a major challenge has been the declining quality of parliamentary debates, increasing reliance on ordinances; the latter is often invoked due to repeated disruption, walkouts, and adjournments of parliament, leading to lower legislative productivity. That is, the executive has exercised its option to use ordinances more regularly and in effect, as a substitute for parliamentary debates, which has raised critical issues about democratic accountability. In recent years, corruption scandals, political instability and electoral malpractices have threatened the operational closure of India's

parliamentary democracy. The crime-politics nexus in elections is manifested by the fact that they know that they have pending criminal cases for which they still contest elections. Electoral funding requires scrutiny because it is so opaque. Political instability from defections and realignments because they "never wanted to be in any corner" sometimes leaves governance frozen and unable to act. We need stronger parliamentary democracy by implementing reforms to introduce some accountability and a level playing field: a state-funded electoral system, stronger laws against defections, digital processes about the legislative proceedings, and means to facilitate constructive parliamentary debates. Modern challenges have to be tackled to ensure that parliament can function well in the Indian parliamentary model as a deservedly respected and aspirational institution of democracy.

Comparative Analysis with Other Democracies

Parliamentary democracy, though common across various nations, takes different forms based on historical, political, and cultural contexts. India's system, while influenced by the **British Westminster model**, has several distinct features. A comparative analysis with Britain and other Commonwealth nations highlights these differences, influences, and potential lessons for India's parliamentary functioning.

- **Differences Between Indian and British Parliamentary Systems-** While India adopted the **British parliamentary system**, significant differences exist in their structures and functioning. The **Indian parliamentary system** is based on a **written constitution**, which clearly defines the separation of powers, fundamental rights, and the framework of governance. In contrast, **Britain follows an unwritten constitution**, relying on conventions, legal precedents, and parliamentary sovereignty. Another key difference is in the **head of state**. In Britain, the **monarch (King or Queen)** serves as the ceremonial head, while the **Prime Minister** is the head of government. In India, the **President** functions as the constitutional head, while the

Prime Minister leads the executive. However, India's President has certain discretionary powers, such as withholding assent to bills, which are not available to the British monarch. The **role of the upper house** also differs. Britain's **House of Lords** consists of hereditary peers, life peers, and clergy, while India's **Rajya Sabha** is composed of representatives elected by state legislatures and nominated experts. Unlike the House of Lords, which has limited legislative powers, the Rajya Sabha plays an active role in lawmaking, budget approvals, and policy discussions. In terms of **federalism**, India follows a **quasi-federal structure**, where powers are distributed between the Union and states, whereas Britain is a **unitary state** with devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland but with ultimate authority resting in Parliament. This distinction gives Indian states more autonomy compared to British regions.

- **Influence of Parliamentary Democracy in Commonwealth Nations-** Many **Commonwealth nations**, including Canada, Australia, and South Africa, have adopted parliamentary democracy with modifications suited to their socio-political conditions. **Canada's parliamentary system**, like India's, follows a **federal structure**, with provinces having autonomous powers. However, Canada's head of state remains the **British monarch**, represented by a Governor-General, unlike India's elected President. Australia also follows a **parliamentary democracy**, but with a **bicameral system similar to India's**, where the **Senate (upper house)** represents states and territories, while the **House of Representatives (lower house)** is directly elected. Like Canada, Australia retains the British monarch as the ceremonial head. In contrast, **South Africa transitioned from a parliamentary to a hybrid system**, where the President is both the head of state and government but is elected by Parliament. This structure differs from India's, where the President is indirectly elected but has limited executive powers.

- **Lessons from Global Parliamentary Practices-** India can learn from global parliamentary experiences to enhance its governance. **Britain's strong parliamentary debates and Question Hour traditions** ensure government accountability. India, facing disruptions and reduced legislative productivity, can implement stricter rules to maintain decorum and enhance deliberations. Canada's **election funding transparency laws** regulate political donations, reducing the influence of money in politics. India can strengthen its electoral reforms by adopting similar mechanisms to curb unregulated political financing. Australia's **Senate committee system** allows for detailed legislative scrutiny before passing laws. India's **parliamentary committees**, though effective, need more autonomy and resources to function efficiently. By analyzing these systems, India can reinforce its parliamentary democracy, ensuring greater transparency, accountability, and citizen participation.

Conclusion

India's parliamentary democracy has a fascinating period, underscored by prior governance traditions, colonial legislative settings, and nationalist movement for self-rule. From ancient democratic practices in Vedic assemblies and legislative treaties by British rulers, in independent India following the roll out of the parliamentary system, the country has constructed a strong democratic premise. The utopian vision of a reliable, legitimate, and accountable democracy has experienced a few milestones to reinforce democratic governance, particularly: the Government of India Act (1935) which was a gateway for real federalism, accession of the Indian Constitution (1950), and electoral and parliamentary reforms. India's parliamentary role has several features of its strengths. It provides executive accountability, representation of diverse communities, and legislation conducting policies through debates. The federal-replica structure of the governance provides autonomy for regional systems and regions. Judicial

review supports democratic influence through interpretation of constitutional provisions and ensuring that the executive do not exceed their authority. Despite India's democratic practices there is still a level of some existing weaknesses. These include violations of parliamentary directives, outputs with the quality of debate, over-reliance on ordinance power, and criminalization emerges with politics. The existence of electoral abuse as well as the absence of the essence of intra-party democracy all work together with money power to deliver a challenge of fair representation. The ever-growing robust role of coalition politics has reduced effective governance, and has limitations to policy improvements or initiatives.. Keeping India's parliamentary democracy vibrant will require reform. Things such as electoral laws should be revised to control uncontrolled political funding, and make the finances of political parties more visible to the electorate, while developing a cleaner political culture. Parliament should make rules prohibiting rapid or frequent dislocation and inoperability, while not inappropriately stifling constructive debate. The judicial and committees of parliament should be furnished with the capability and authority to better scrutinize proposed legislation. Additionally, exercising technology and innovative governance, partially through digitally conducting parliamentary meetings and online public engagement, may keep democracy interactive. India's parliamentary democracy has a future, if we work to adapt and reform it in line with its changes. British Parliament vastly changed since it was first established in India. We should keep working to strengthen democratic institutions, ensure greater transparency in governance and foster a higher level of public confidence in a system that still practices tolerance and freedom. The progress of India’s democracy and parliamentary system will ultimately determine the degree to which India's democratic spirit has been upheld, under promising parliamentary growth.

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Panjab University Research Journal (Arts)
VOL. LVI 35-52 (July-December 2025) *ISSN: 0970-5260*

Documenting the Experience of Partition in Malwa: A Case Study of Lohara Village in Sri Muktsar Sahib District

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Abstract

The Indian subcontinent witnessed its gravest violence, suffering, and displacement following the partition in August 1947. The experiences of border regions of Punjab, Bengal and others are the most awful of them. The Malwa region of Punjab is one among the partitioned areas which got directly impacted by the menace of violence and displacement. However, the region seems missing to grasp a substantial place in the academic studies. In this context, the present study seeks to understand the nuances and experiences of the partition in Malwa. It is a humble attempt to tap the process of partition and migration in the region and to contextualise it through the oral trajectory of the locals and displaced people. Additionally, the case study of Lohara village in Sri Muktsar Sahib district is precisely to understand the partition narratives of the region and personalised memories of the people in the purview of violence and displacement.

Key Words: Lohara village, Malwa, Memories, Partition, Refugees.

Introduction

Malwa has been a linguistic zone which constantly featured in the Punjab's historical and cultural traditions. It is one among the three major cultural regions of Punjab, along with Manjha and Doaba. It is majorly termed for the area south to the Sutlej River, and also known as heartland of Punjab. In present days it makes majority area of the Indian state of

Punjab, extended over the southern districts. It is vastly known for its Malwai language along with unique and distinct cultural characteristics. Malwa since medieval time have been a natural pathway, connecting various geographical zones to each other, therefore more responsive to the movement of people. The region has assimilated bulk of migrated tribes, communities and groups which have diversified its culture and enriched its folk universe. The syncretic character of Malwa brought more inter-faith sacred spaces within its cultural identity and the same have kept the people connected even after more than seventy five years of the partition.

As a border region Malwa was impulsively impacted by the partition. The region got partitioned between two countries and many areas of close proximity found themselves on the opposite sides of the border. The political upheavals along with the impulsion of religious factors have tossed the region to violence and large exodus of displacement. Malwa also provided anomalies in violent occurrences as the nature of violence differed from those of Doaba and Majha.[1] Malwa region due to its proximity to the border and several railway junctions received a vast number of refugees who were later settled in the same regions.

Academia for a long time has studied partition as an unavoidable outcome of Indian freedom struggle. Historical studies in the first two decades of independence focused merely on the strategic role played by communal elements and attitude of British government in containing the situation. Scholars wrote extensively about the violence that shocked Bengal and Punjab but forgotten with 1947 only.[2] A number of studies during the same time focused on government's handling of the rehabilitation process and resettling of the refugees, based on government data these studies focused on policies, laws and plans which were devised to speed up the relocation of the displaced.[3] The understanding of partition definitely evolved as more government records were made available. British officials placed in Punjab and elsewhere provided shocking details of the bloodshed and communal rage by publishing their daily diaries and memoirs.

It was with the emergence of Subaltern studies that scholarly attention filtered to people who were involved in the violent whirlwind of partition. For the first time studies focused on the consequences of partition instead on how it happened. Scholars like Gyanendra Pandey (2009) argued how historians had failed to study the impact of partition on the lives of people. He also criticized the attempt to impose 'oneness' in partition narratives by ignoring the 'living experiences' of the people. He emphasized how more contextualized form of living community would help understanding the lives of people affected by partition and its uprooting. The accounts of Urvashi Butalia (2000), Kamala Basin and Ritu Menon (1998), Sarah Ansari (2006), Joya Chatterjee (2011) unearthed the unexplored vistas of partition and people who suffered it, but yet the academic studies have done less to record or document these living memories of survivors.

Punjab whose cultural identity suffered the gravest jolt with communal carnage, mass migration and resettlement of refugees has also ignored the oral experiences of displaced. Academic attention of post-partition Punjab focused mainly on the politico-religious consolidation of Sikhism which ignored the presence of any other socio-religious or cultural elements. Scholars remained engaged with the reorganization of Punjab, restructuring of Sikh identity, Naxalite movement, caste conflicts and assertion of identities whereas partition studies have attracted limited attention. Partition and Punjab before 1966 remained largely missing from academic debates and history syllabi of the universities.

Literary works however have voiced the horror of partition and individual experiences but no attempt has been made so far to contextualize the experience of displaced people. Demographic studies in recent time focus on the urban planning and allotment of refugee colonies in cities like Ludhiana, Ferozepur, Jalandhar, and Gurdaspur. These works are primarily centred on the cities where refugee camps were set up and later on garden colonies and model towns were designed to settle the refugees.

The experiences of people however seem totally missing in these discourses.

This study finds its significance in understanding and documenting the experience of partition in this region, particularly in Malwa. It also seeks to map the social-economic mobility of the refugees and their contribution to their new homes. It aims to study the linkage of these refugee settlers to the culture of the host communities. The study traces the post partition experiences and complications faced by the refugees in relocation. It focuses on the rebuilding of their lives in a new set up and documents their memories of past and contribution to present. The individual experience form the case study of Lohara village in Sri Muktsar Sahib district is a humble attempt to understand the reflection of the partition in Malwa.

Conceptual Framework and Overview of Literature

Maurice Halbwachs (1992) argues that space, and physical objects create a kind of familiarity and thus, induce a sense of stability. A break between individual's thought and his reality often causes trauma and psychological instability. He argues how the space and time keep the notion of reality alive for individual and thus anchor his memories. Radhika Mohanram in one of her articles (2016: 3-21) emphasize how controlling this sense of reality, India has somehow tempered with the memories of partition. The narratives build around government records have definitely undermined the severity of human trauma and disturbance of everyday stability thus scarring their lives forever. In recent studies scholars have used memory as a tool to capture the partition's trauma, they have provided opportunities to the victims to relive and recall their lived horrors. Stanley Cohen (1995: 7-50) have warned the scholars about the delicacy of memory, as memory itself can be used as a political tool. He points out that social amnesia which can highlight certain incident, may also cause the memory of another related incidents to wither away.

Paul Connerton in '*How Societies Remember*' (1989) talks about how memory of a group is conveyed, sustained and kept alive. Ernest Renan however argues the importance of memories to create an alternate narrative. He makes a distinction between collective memories and individual memories. Renan in his work, '*What is a Nation'* (1893) argues that collective memories are used to tie all the national narratives in a uniform 'oneness'. Notion of nation requires certain traumatic past to be forgotten but individual and family memories challenge the authenticity of such attempts by highlighting the anomalies of collective memories, therefore no extensive efforts are made to record the individual memory.[4]

Partition according to Mohanram (2016: 3-21) has been over shadowed by the euphoria of independence. Some scholars however have managed to shift the lens of academic studies to capture the lost stories of faceless people. In '*Other Side of Silence'*, Urvashi Butalia (2000) deals with the oral narratives of 1947 highlighting the senseless violence committed against women and how women themselves acted as agency to this violence. Her account highlights the psychological terror faced by the women and the silence they succumbed to even years after of its happening. She talks about the patriarchal structure which leaves fewer options for the victims and left women behind in order to speed up the movement. Most of the victims who were attacked in refugee camps were disowned by their families and forced to prostitution. Vazira Zamindar in '*Long Partition and Making of Modern South Asia*' (2007) highlights the idea of territorial nationality and displaced identity of the migrants in both India and Pakistan, her attempt to create an exposure to individual experiences is something which required to be done extensively in partition narratives.

Raghuvendra Tanwar in '*Reporting the Partition of Punjab 1947: Press, Public and Other Opinions*' (2006) highlights the role played by news agencies in reporting the incidences of violence and how press reflected

public opinion in the form of cartooning and drawing. Tanwar's prime focus is how despite detailed planning on government part to transfer the people, partition caught masses off-guard, setting them in sudden waves of disaster. In many of his talks, he have made the same observation and raised doubts on why in the absence of state sponsored violence, the character of partition violence remains brutal and extensive. The observation in a way can provide answer as to why the recorded memories of partition are missing from the historical narratives, as communities in post partition phase attempted to reconstruct their identities. Tanwar also recalls his own experiences of living with the migrants in his paternal village. He mentions how the language, culture, even rituals, dress of these displaced families was different from those of the natives, but determined effort to survive saw these families being assimilated in the host environment and start contributing in its prosperity as well. (2006: 24)

Mention must be made of Amritjit Singh, Nalini Iyer and Rahul Gairola's, '*Revisiting India's Partition: New Essays on Memory, Culture and Politics'*, (2016) which explores themes of partition, primarily related to migration, citizenship, border, refugee and caste violence and recent communal violence. Besides this Nandita Bhavnani, (2014) Saraha Ansari (2019) and others in their works have captured rebuilding of the refugee lives and their identities as *sharanarthis* and *muhajirs* in their new homes. Farina Ibrahim in her, *'Settlers, Saints and Sovereigns: An Ethnography of State Formation in Western India'* (2008) ventured in to the role of locality and its sacred spaces in the inclusion and exclusion of migrants in post partition Kutch.

These works have highlighted the need to zero down geographical zones to trace the experience of partition as every region displayed different responses and recollection of the partition. Scholars have picked geographical areas to tap the memories of the displaced refuges of the

partition; such attempts also produce varying account and pattern of partition.[5] Stephen Keller in a 1967 work, '*Uprooting and Social Change: The Role of Refugees in Development*' have interviewed an extensive number of refugees from the camps of South East Punjab and traced their experiences of the violence and migration.

Another major contribution in tapping the 'living Memory' of partition comes from the digital media platforms. Scholars like Ajay Bhardwaj has managed to capture the unfiltered accounts of eye-witnesses of 1947's horror in 'Rubba Hun ki Kariye' (2007). Bhardwaj in this documentary managed to record few first-generation narrators such as Prof. Karam Singh Chauhan, who passed away in the year 2007. The documentary highlighted the guilt and psychological trauma of those who took part in communal violence. Ajay Bhardwaj eloquently narrates the tales of how divine justice befalls on those who committed crimes against their neighbour. The documentary reflects on the shared cultural roots of both India and Pakistan as refugees on both sides of border left behind rich cultural tradition which can be traced in music, poetry, cuisine, rituals and sacred spaces.

Bhardwaj somehow amplified the relevance of Raghuvendra Tanwar's observation regarding the nature and cruelty of partition. It also redirects attention how memory can be used to record the unfiltered account of those who witnessed and have survived the carnage. Another valiant attempt to capture the unadulterated stories of partition survivors came from the digital archive of partition established by Guneeta Bhalla in 2010. She along with few of her colleagues and volunteers has managed to record more than 4000 such stories on both side of the border. These oral stories have given platform to those who have been marginalized from the historic lens, no voice for their pain and losses. Recently it has organized a 75 days narration of partition to commemorate 75 years of independence and to emphasize how celebration of independence is incomplete without

talking about the partition and its horror.[6]

Indian Foundation of Arts (IFA) has recently funded a project to Nirmala, a folk artist and partition activist from Haryana. In her project '*Hijrat ke Bol*', she has attempted to collect folk songs, depicting the horror of partition. Her work captures how people remember not just the bloodshed but how people in the blink of an eye were forced to migrate to places they had no connection with. In these songs which she calls as '*visthapan ke geet'* (songs of displacement), Nirmala searches for reason why these songs are not popular unlike other folk traditions. She observes that 'folk' is generally associated with celebration when a community come together to enjoy special occasions, whereas these songs of partition carry pain, loss and horror of past, therefore there is no occasion to celebrate or remember. She provides a horrific account of those who migrated to various region of Haryana during partition and the songs these people have composed on their journey from their native places. She tells the story of Balwanti, a displaced Hindu woman from Mewat, Haryana's only Muslim majority area, and focuses on how Balwanti separated from her family found a residence in the village. She continues to teach Muslim children and is respectfully addressed as 'behanji' by elder and youngsters alike.

Case Study of Lohara Village of Sri Muktsar Sahib District

Muktsar also known as Khidrana had a long association with both medieval zamindari zones and Sikh's sacred traditions of 18th century. Muktsar as a region had been known for its fertile agricultural production but it was also a popular center of medieval horse trade since it was situated within the vicinity of Mughal garrison town of Ferozepur. The area had also been associated with the Panwar Rajput who moved further to Rohtak and forged matrimonial alliances with other local tribes. The clan composition of this region is further complicated by constantly shifting zamindari dynamics of the local clans, which also had created

specific pockets of dominating Jat clans. Butiawala region within Muktsar is connected to the legend of Bhagat Puran while region around Abohar had been a key centre of the Bhatti clan. The zamindar tribes even in late 19th century has been holding vast agricultural tracts and therefore patronizing several artisans' groups and thus enriching the social and religious orientation of the region.

Administratively Muktsar remained a part of Ferozepur division under the British and continued to be so until 1972 when it was reorganized to be a part of Faridkot district. In 1995 it was officially made a district named as Sri Muktsar Sahib. It is further having three tehsils named as Malout, Gidderbaha, Lambi and Muktsar. In 1947 with India's partition Ferozepur has received as many as 349762 refugees and according to the census of 1951 thousands of these displaced people were settled in Muktsar as well (1951).

Lohara is a village in Malout tehsil of Sri Muktsar Sahib District. The village was settled around 1800 by Jat of Zoyian clan who hold this village under their zamindari for more than two hundred years. However, during the partition the family along with others left the village. The tale of their displacement can still be gathered from Abdul Majeed Zoyaian, a sixth generation from the original settlers of the Lohara village. It was a Muslim majority village that saw a massive migration during partition and an equal extensive process of refugee settlement. It provides a fresh anomaly in the partition stories as a large chunk of migrants from Lahore were settled in the village. Some of these families in post partition period have not only rebuild their lives in the village, succeeded in various professions but have also managed to help many of separated kins to meet each other on both side of the border.

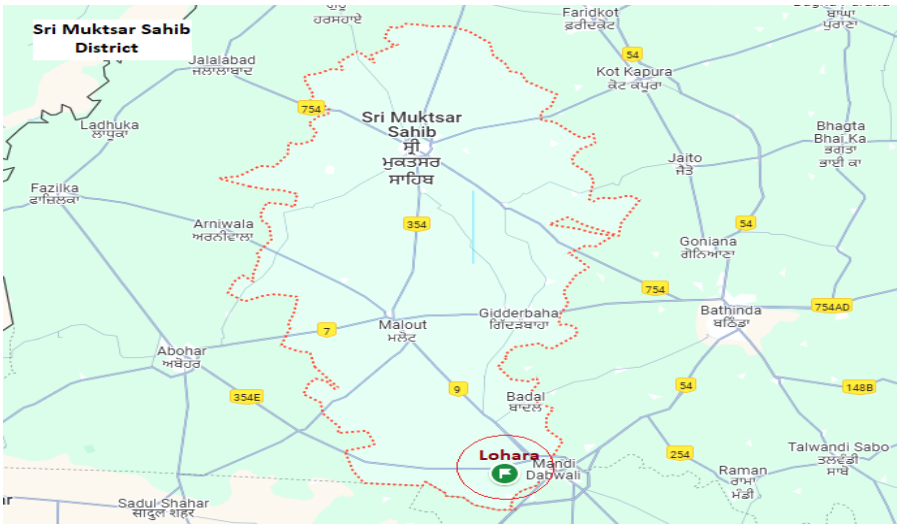

Image 1: Location of Lohara Village in Sri Muktsar Sahib District. (Source: Google Maps)

The village was originally named as Karotikheda, and a large part of its land was owned by the family of Bala Lambardar. According to popular belief the family of Alahi Baksh Lohar (iron smith) used to visit Karotikheda every season to provide their craft related services to the villagers. The lambardar at some point of a time offered the Lohar family to settle down in Karotikheda permanently by offering them a significant amount of land in the eastern side of the village. However with the passage of time, the successor of Alahi Baksh went to Lahore high court to file a permanent claim over the land and also demanded a separated lambardari for them. The court however declined their claim for separate lambardari instead renaming Karotikheda as Lohara after the Alahi Baksh family name (2021).

In the wake of partition, both the lambardar Zohiyan family and Lohar families being Muslims had migrated to Pakistan. The majority of these villagers migrated from Lohara got settled in Pakpatan in Pakistan. There for having close connection with the cult of Baba Farid. On the other side

a large number of refugees from Pakistan belonging to several villages named Gajan Singh Wala, Jafarke, Buddhke, Katlu, Daftu, Bahawalpur and others had settled in Lohara. Additionally, some families of Prajapat (potters) from Murkadim village have also settled in the village.

Babu Singh Akku, a native zamindar of the village and a third-generation narrator recalls stories of his grandfather and father during partition. His grandfather, who had participated in the Second World War and retired as a Subedar from military, along with others have helped many of the fellow Muslims villagers to safely cross the border amid the raging violence. They assisted several of Muslim families with ration and resources and accompanied them to Fazilka, from where these families have crossed to Pakistan. Babu Singh Akku narrates the stories of how the villagers had formed 'jathas' to protect their Muslim neighbors and patrolled through night to keep them safe until their evacuation.

58 ਸਾਲਾਂ ਤੋਂ ਆਪਣਿਆਂ ਨੂੰ ਮਿਲਣ ਲਈ ਤਾਂਘਦਾ ਹੈ

ਦਰਸ਼ਨ ਸਿੰਘ ਉਰਫ਼ ਗੁਲਾਮ ਨਬੀ

ਦਰਸ਼ਨ ਸਿੰਘ ਉਰਫ਼ ਗੁਲਾਮ ਨਬੀ

ਦਰਸ਼ਨ ਸਿੰਘ ਬਾਜਵਾ

Image 2: *58 Sala ton aapniya nu Milan lyi tanghdah: Darshan Singh urf Gulam Nabi.* (News reporting the story of Darshan Singh alias Gulam Nabi longing to meet his relatives for 58 years). His photo on the left. (Source: Ajit, 11th September, 2005)

देश विभाजन में बिछुड़े भाई

वक्त ने दर्शन को बनाया गुलाम नबी

रवि मोंगा • डबवाली, 15 फरवरी।

पेड़ों के नीचे खून के जिंदा निशान थे,
शायद मेरे चमन के परिंदे जवान थे।
जिंदगी की फिल्म फिर अधूरी ही रह गई,
वो सीन रह गए जो कहानी की जान थे।

किसी कवि की यह पंक्तियां लाहौर (पाकिस्तान) स्थित हुसैन की दरगाह पर बैठे एक बूढ़े फकीर गुलाम नबी पर सार्थक बैठती हैं। वक्त के थपेड़ों ने उसे दर्शन सिंह से गुलाम नबी बना दिया। अपने वतन हिंदुस्तान में जीवन के अंतिम क्षण गुजारने की लालसा एवं आंखों में अपनों से मिलने का सपना यह शख्स हर रोज देखता है।

गुलाम नबी

भारत-पाक विभाजन का दंश झेल रहा दर्शनसिंह उर्फ गुलाम नबी भारतीय होने के बावजूद पिछले 60 वर्षों से पाकिस्तान में रह कर अपनों के आने का इंतजार कर रहा है। बचपन व जवानी का उसका सफर तो यादों के सहारे ही बीत गया मगर वक्त ने जीवन के अंतिम पड़ाव में दर्शन सिंह के लिए लाहौर के तार भारत के गांव लोहारा से जोड़ दिए हैं। डबवाली के समीप स्थित पंजाब के गांव लोहारा में दर्शन सिंह का ननिहाल है। गांव लोहारा के वृद्ध किसान जोगिंदरसिंह को वर्षों पूर्व जुदा हुए अपने उस भाई (बुआ का लड़का) दर्शनसिंह के जिंदा होने का पता चला। भावनाओं का सागर हिलोरें लेने लगा है मगर मिलन के रास्ते में कई अड़चनें हैं। धुंधली यादों को ताजा करते हुए जोगेंद्र सिंह बताते हैं कि करीब 60 वर्ष पहले बचपन में ही दर्शनसिंह के सिर से उसके पिता का साया उठ गया था। पति की मौत के बाद उसकी बुआ संतो का शेष परिवार भी विभाजन के बाद उजड़ गया। पाकिस्तान से जिस काफिले में उसकी बुआ संतो भारत आ रही थी उस काफिले पर पाकिस्तान के गांव पीर सुतके के नजदीक किसी ने हमला कर दिया। इस हमले में संतो के पुत्र पाल व पुत्री पालो का कत्ल कर दिया गया। संतो ने अपने दूसरे पुत्र दर्शन को बचाने के लिए एक गन्ने के खेत में छिपा दिया। यहीं से 12 वर्षीय दर्शन सिंह अपनों से सदा के लिए अलग हो गया।

संतो तो घायलावस्था में किसी प्रकार भारत आ पहुंची लेकिन दर्शनसिंह पाकिस्तान में ही रह गया। एक मां अपने बेटे के लिए तड़पती रही। अपने बिछड़े पुत्र की तलाश में संतो 1958 में पाकिस्तान भी गई और वहां से किसी दर्शन सिंह को भारत भी लेकर आई। बाद में पता चला कि यह दर्शन सिंह उनका पुत्र नहीं था एवं वह भारत आकर कहीं गायब हो गया। पुत्र के इंतजार में संतों की किसी बीमारी के कारण मौत हो गई एवं वास्तविक दर्शन सिंह की पाकिस्तान से घर वापसी का अध्याय बंद हो गया। (शेष पेज 12 पर)

जोगिंद्र सिंह

Image 3: *Vakt ne Darshan ko Banaya Gulam Nabi* (With time Darshan became Gulam Nabi). (Source: Dainik Bhaskar, 16th February 2006.)

देश सेवक ਐਤਵਾਰ 12 ਅਪ੍ਰੈਲ 2008

ਬਟਵਾਰੇ ਦਾ ਦਰਦ

ਜੋਗਿੰਦਰ ਸਿੰਘ ਵਿਛੜੇ ਭਰਾ ਨੂੰ ਮਿਲਣ ਲਈ ਲਾਹੌਰ ਰਵਾਨਾ

ਲਾਹੌਰ ਰਵਾਨਾ ਹੋਣ ਤੋਂ ਪਹਿਲਾਂ ਜੋਗਿੰਦਰ ਸਿੰਘ ਅਤੇ ਬਾਬੂ ਸਿੰਘ ਪਾਸਪੋਰਟ ਅਤੇ ਵੀਜਾ ਵਿਖਾਉਂਦੇ ਹੋਏ, (ਸੱਜੇ) ਗੁਲਾਮ ਨਬੀ ਉਰਫ ਦਰਸ਼ਨ ਸਿੰਘ ਦੀ ਲਾਹੌਰ ਦੀ ਫਾਈਲ ਫੋਟੋ।

ਮਲੋਟ/11 ਅਪ੍ਰੈਲ/ਸ਼ਾਮ ਜ਼ਲੇਜਾ

ਦੇਸ਼ ਦੀ ਵੰਡ ਸਮੇਂ ਖੱਬੇ-ਖੱਬੇ ਹੋਏ ਪਰਿਵਾਰਾਂ 'ਚੋਂ ਮਲੋਟ ਸਬ ਡਵੀਜ਼ਨ ਆਉਂਦ ਪਿੰਡ ਲੁਹਾਰਾ ਦੇ ਜੋਗਿੰਦਰ ਸਿੰਘ 1947 'ਚ ਵਿਛੜੇ ਭੂਆ ਦੇ ਪੁੱਤ ਦਰਸਨ ਸਿੰਘ ਨੂੰ ਮਿਲਣ ਲਈ ਅੱਜ ਪਿੰਡ ਲੁਹਾਰਾ ਤੋਂ ਲਾਹੌਰ ਲਈ ਰਵਾਨਾ ਹੋਇਆ। ਜਾਣਕਾਰੀ ਮੁਤਾਬਕ ਬਟਵਾਰੇ ਸਮੇਂ ਵਿਛੜਿਆ ਭੂਆ ਸੈਤੋ ਦਾ ਛੋਟਾ ਪੁੱਤਰ ਦਰਸ਼ਨ ਲਾਹੌਰ ਦੀ ਮਾਧੋ ਲਾਲ ਹੁਸੈਨ ਦੀ ਦਰਗਾਹ 'ਤੇ ਮੁਸਲਮਾਨ ਫਕੀਰ ਗੁਲਾਮ ਨਬੀ ਬਣ ਕੇ ਰਹਿ ਰਿਹਾ ਹੈ। ਬਟਵਾਰੇ ਦੀ ਮਾਰ ਝੱਲ ਰਹੇ ਜੋਗਿੰਦਰ ਸਿੰਘ ਦਾ ਹੁਣ ਪਾਕਿਸਤਾਨ ਜਾਣ ਲਈ ਸਬੰਧ ਬਣਿਆ ਹੈ। ਫਿਲਮਾਂ ਵਰਗੀ ਇਸ ਕਹਾਣੀ ਨੂੰ ਦੁਹਰਾਉਂਦਿਆਂ ਤੁਰਦਿਆਂ ਜੋਗਿੰਦਰ ਸਿੰਘ ਨੇ ਪੱਤਰਕਾਰਾਂ ਨਾਲ ਗੱਲਬਾਤ ਕਰਦਿਆਂ ਦੱਸਿਆ ਕਿ 1947 'ਚ ਬਟਵਾਰੇ ਸਮੇਂ ਜਦ ਭਰਾਵਾਂ 'ਚ ਵਿਛੋੜਾ ਪਿਆ ਸੀ ਤਾਂ ਉਸ ਦੀ ਉਮਰ 19 ਸਾਲ ਦੀ ਸੀ ਤੇ ਜਦ ਉਨ੍ਹਾਂ ਦੀ ਭੂਆ ਜਖਮੀ ਹਾਲਤ ਵਿਚ ਆਪਣੇ ਦੋਵੇਂ ਪੁੱਤਰ ਨੂੰਹ ਤੇ ਧੀ ਨਾਲੋਂ ਵਿੱਛੜ ਕੇ ਇਥੇ ਪੁੱਜੀ। ਇਸ ਮਗਰੋਂ ਉਹ ਲਗਾਤਾਰ ਆਪਣੇ ਪਰਿਵਾਰ ਨੂੰ ਲੱਭਣ ਦੇ ਯਤਨ ਕਰਦੀ ਰਹੀ, ਪਰ ਗਮ ਅਤੇ ਕੈਂਸਰ ਤੋਂ ਪੀੜਤ ਇਸ ਜਹਾਨ ਤੋਂ ਰੁਖਸਤ ਹੋ ਗਈ। ਜੋਗਿੰਦਰ ਸਿੰਘ ਨੇ ਦੱਸਿਆ ਕਿ ਇਸ ਮਾਮਲੇ 'ਚ ਫਿਰ ਉਸਨੇ ਉਸ ਸਮੇਂ ਜਾਗੀ ਜਦੋਂ ਸਤੰਬਰ 2005 ਵਿਚ ਪੱਤਰਕਾਰਾਂ ਦੇ ਇਕ ਵਫਦ ਨੂੰ ਲਾਹੌਰ ਦੇ ਮਾਧੋ ਲਾਲ ਹੁਸੈਨ ਦੀ ਦਰਗਾਹ 'ਤੇ 65 ਸਾਲਾ ਫਕੀਰ ਗੁਲਾਮ ਨਬੀ ਨੇ ਆਪਣੇ-ਆਪ ਨੂੰ ਸਿੱਖ ਪਰਿਵਾਰ ਨਾਲ ਸਬੰਧਤ ਤੇ ਜਿਲਾਵਾ ਆਪਣੀ ਮਾਂ ਬਾਪ ਚਾਚੇ ਤੇ ਪਰਿਵਾਰ ਦੇ ਨਾਮ ਤੇ ਬਿਨਾਂ ਹੋਰ ਅਜਿਹੀਆਂ ਜਾਣਕਾਰੀਆਂ ਦਿੱਤੀਆਂ, ਜਿਸ ਤੋਂ ਸਪੱਸ਼ਟ ਹੋ ਗਿਆ ਕਿ ਉਜਾੜੇ 'ਚ ਵਿਛੜਿਆ ਦਰਸ਼ਨ ਹੀ ਮੁਸਲਮਾਨ ਫਕੀਰ ਗੁਲਾਮ ਨਬੀ ਉਨ੍ਹਾਂ ਦਾ ਭਰਾ ਹੈ। 80 ਸਾਲਾਂ ਦੇ ਜੋਗਿੰਦਰ ਸਿੰਘ ਤੇ [redacted] ਉਸ ਦੀ ਮਾਤਾ ਜੋਗਿੰਦਰ ਕੌਰ ਤੋਂ ਇਲਾਵਾ ਭਾਵੇਂ ਪਰਿਵਾਰ ਵਿਚ ਅਜਿਹਾ ਕੋਈ ਨਹੀਂ ਸੀ ਜਿਸ ਨੇ ਦਰਸ਼ਨ ਨੂੰ ਵੇਖਿਆ ਹੋਵੇ, ਪਰ ਅੱਜ ਉਸ ਦੇ ਜਿੰਦਾ ਹੋਣ ਦੀ ਖ਼ਬਰ ਨੇ ਸਾਰੇ ਪਰਿਵਾਰ 'ਚ ਉਸ ਨੂੰ ਮਿਲਣ ਦੀ ਤਾਂਘ ਜਾਗ ਪਈ ਹੈ। ਜੋਗਿੰਦਰ ਸਿੰਘ ਦੀ ਇਸ ਕਹਾਣੀ ਵਿਚ ਅਹਿਮ ਭੂਮਿਕਾ ਪਿੰਡ ਦੇ ਬਾਬੂ ਸਿੰਘ ਦੀ ਵੀ ਹੈ, ਜਿਸ ਨੇ ਜੋਗਿੰਦਰ ਸਿੰਘ ਦੀ ਬਿਮਾਰੀ ਤੇ ਵੀਜਾ ਸਮੱਸਿਆ ਦੇ ਬਾਵਜੂਦ ਵੀ ਉਸ ਦੀ ਇਸ ਫੇਰੀ ਦੀ ਤਿਆਰੀ ਲਈ ਸਰਗਰਮੀ ਰੱਖੀ। ਅਖੀਰ ਅੱਜ ਉਹ ਦਿਨ ਆ ਗਿਆ ਜਦ ਲੁਹਾਰੇ ਤੋਂ ਜੋਗਿੰਦਰ ਸਿੰਘ ਤੇ ਬਾਬੂ ਸਿੰਘ ਦੀ ਜੋੜੀ ਵਾਹਗੇ ਬਾਰਡਰ 'ਤੇ ਪੁੱਜ ਗਈ।

Figure 4: *Joginder Singh vichade paranu milan lyi Lahore rawana*. News reporting Joginder Singh and Babu Singh showing their passport before visit to Lahore, Pakistan. (Source: Desh Sewak, 12 April 2008.)

Akku himself has spent past few decades in unifying many of partition victims with their families. He shares that in September 2005 an Indian delegate including Darshan Singh Bajwa went to Pakistan. Bajwa during his visit to shrine of Shah Madho Lal Hussain in Lahore met a fakir named Gulam Nabi. In conversation with him Bajwa got to know that Nabi's original name was Darshan Singh, who got separated from his family during the partition and forced to remain in Pakistan where he changed his name and faith later. After coming to India, Bajwa attempted to trace the family of Nabi and got to known about Joginder Singh from Lohara village who was maternal brother of Nabi. The attempt of Babu Singh Akki and Darshan Singh Bajwa made the meeting of the separated brothers Joginder Singh and Darshan Singh alias Gulam Nabi in 2008.

Conclusion

In the course of field work researchers have managed to identify more than 30 villages in the region which came into existence due to state's extensive rehabilitation plan. The cultural as well as religious dynamics of Malwa has shifted due to forced displacement, academic writings have tried to understand the reasons behind partition but have totally kept silent when it comes to capturing the experiences of the displaced families. The result has been disastrous as a lot such experiences are now lost to us with the first generation of partition but a lot can still be recorded from second and third generation of the survivors. The region with its rich sacred traditions has managed to integrate several new spaces which became popular due to the followership of the newly settled refugees. The academia has yet to understand the depth of changes brought by the settlement of the cross regional communities of refugees in the region. The paper attempts to captures as well as highlight the need of refocusing the new partition related narratives. Countless such villages are still waiting to get scholarly attention and needed to be explored in order to know the human experience of 1947, a year that brought not just independence but also violence and partition.

Acknowledgement

We are grateful to all the people who helped us in writing this paper, especially Babu Singh Akku of Lohara village for his time, insightful views, and for sharing his personalised experiences of the partition.

Notes

[1] The region also has been known for its poetic traditions like kavishri and kali, partition though see the departure of some of its finest crafters but the traditions have been kept alive by the locals and refugees in villages like Lalbai and Kot Fatha in districts Sri Muktsar Sahib have contributed by adding partition as a genre of its own.

[2] Works such as G.S. Talib's 'Muslim League Attack on Sikhs and Hindus in Punjab 1947' published in 1950 or J.Nanda's Punjab Uprooted: A Survey of the Punjab's Riots and Rehabilitation Programmes, published in 1948;Melcom Darling's 'At Freedom's Door' published in 1949 and many other works explore themes regarding colonial divisive policies, role of Muslim League, Mountbatten plan and political dynamics which make the partition a necessary though a tragic happening.

[3] Mention should be made of M.S. Randhawa' s '*Out of Ashes'* published in 1954, Satya Rai's *Partition of Punjab* in 1985, focusing mainly on the government aide provided to the refuges, evacuee property and management of refugee camps.

[4] Ernest Renan, 'What is a Nation'; he interposes that family memory provide a context in which linked landscape, monuments, places, fairs, family stories and lost home to those who never been there. So, these family memories which are often passed from one generation to another; Radhika Manon highlights how the memory of Indian Independence has overtaken the memory of partition, the pain limited

only to those who were uprooted and lost loved ones.

[5] Mention must be made to an unpublished doctoral work of Pritpal Virdee, 'Partition and Locality: Case Study of the Impact of Partition and its Aftermath in Punjab Region 1947-61', degree awarded by Contently University, 2004, the study is focused on the migrant's settlement in Ludhiana and Malerkotla region.

[6] www.1947partitionarchive.org

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Panjab University Research Journal (Arts)
VOL. LVI 53-73 (July-December 2025) *ISSN: 0970-5260*

Farmer's Perception of Climate Change and Its Impact on Peach Cultivation: A Case Study of Rajgarh, Himachal Pradesh

SUCHA SINGH & EKTA THAKUR

Abstract

Climate change has emerged as a significant challenge for horticultural crops, particularly stone fruits such as peach (Prunus persica), which is highly sensitive to variations in temperature and rainfall. This study analyzes the farmers perception of climate change and its impact on peach cultivation in Rajgarh, a region traditionally known as the "peach bowl" of Himachal Pradesh. The study is entirely based on primary data collected through a structured survey of 70 peach farmers, supplemented by field observations and secondary sources of data. The findings reveal a clear pattern of climatic change, as perceived by the majority of the respondents: winters are becoming warmer with a noticeable reduction in chilling hours and snowfall, while monsoon rains arrive earlier, but remained erratic and intensive, and are often accompanied by hailstorms during the fruiting stage. Farmers also reported increased incidence of pests and diseases, including phytoplasma, stem borer, and leaf curl, which thrive under warmer and wetter conditions. These climatic shifts have directly reduced peach yield and quality, shortened orchard life, and caused high tree mortality, with many farmers losing 20–30 trees annually. Socio-economic consequences are also significant which include low returns from peach farming, weak and declining market support, and increasing risk forcing several farmers to shift towards apple, other stone fruits, or alternative crops. Majority of the farmers (60 percent) did not invest in any major adaptation strategy, due to low profitability of peach farming. Major adaptation strategies included adoption of low-chill varieties and protective nets which remain minimal and among large farmers only, thus, leaving most orchards farmers vulnerable to climatic stress. The results revealed that the climate change is making it hard for farmers to grow peaches in Rajgarh. This affected the livelihood of farmers and the region's

horticulture. Farmers stressed on government support through climate smart agriculture schemes, provision of climate and pest resilient peach varieties at affordable rates, and insurance against climate extremes and market fluctuations for making peach farming sustainable and profitable in the study region.

Keywords: Farmers Perception, Climate Change, Prunus Persica, Peach Cultivation, Pest Attacks, Adaptations, Livelihoods.

Introduction

Climate change is a pressing global issue, with far-reaching impacts on agriculture, ecosystems, and human livelihoods. Rising temperatures, changing precipitation patterns, and increased frequency of extreme weather events are altering the dynamics of agricultural production worldwide (IPCC, 2013). In India, climate change is expected to have significant impacts on agricultural productivity, with potential losses estimated to be around 10-40% by 2100 (NATCOM, 2012). The horticulture sector, which is a significant contributor to India's economy, is particularly vulnerable to climate change (Aggarwal, 2018; Muzafaruddin et al., 2023; Awasti et al., 2001; Bose and Mitra, 1996; Dutta, 2013).

Horticulture plays a vital role in the economy of Himachal Pradesh, where fruits like apple, peach, plum, apricot, and pear form the backbone of farmers' livelihoods. Among these, peach (Prunus persica) is an important stone fruit crop grown in the Rajgarh area of Sirmaur district, which is popularly known as the "Peach Bowl" of Himachal Pradesh (The Tribune, 2001; Saraswat et al., 2003; Sharma, 2015). Peach cultivation not only provides seasonal income to farm households but also contributes to the local market economy and employment. In recent years, however, farmers have been experiencing major difficulties in peach cultivation due to changing climatic conditions. The crop is highly sensitive to temperature, rainfall, and chilling requirements, and even small variations affect flowering, fruit setting, and yield (Joshi et al., 2017; Vanalli et al., 2023). Farmers in Rajgarh have observed that winters are becoming warmer, snowfall is decreasing, and chilling hours are insufficient. Rainfall has

become highly unpredictable, with early and prolonged monsoon, untimely showers during flowering, and hailstorms during fruiting (Sharma, 2025). Such conditions not only reduce production but also increase pest and disease incidence, especially phytoplasma, stem borer, and leaf curl (Abou-Jawdah et al., 2003; Chawla et al., 2021; Cerutti et al., 2014). These challenges are not only agronomic but also socio-economic. Farmers reported tree mortality in their orchards, low profitability, and weak market opportunities, which discourage reinvestment in peach farming (Kaur & Singh, 2021; Muzafaruddin et al., 2023).

Many farmers are shifting towards other fruits such as apple and plum, or even to vegetables and other crops. Although adaptation strategies like low-chill varieties and protective nets are available, only a very small number of farmers are adopting them due to low income and poor access to technology (Bhati et al., 2018; Cerutti et al., 2014; Vanalli et al., 2023).

The impact of climate change on horticulture in Himachal Pradesh is not limited to peach cultivation (Kaur, 2022). Studies have shown that apple production in the state is also being affected, with changing temperature and precipitation patterns leading to reduced productivity and shifts in cultivation to higher altitudes (Rana et al., 2011). Similar impacts have been observed in other horticultural crops, including changes in flowering patterns, increased susceptibility to pests and diseases, and reduced yield (Malhotra, 2017; Arundhati and Bhagat, 2020; Chawla et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2024). Given the importance of horticulture in Himachal Pradesh's economy and the potential impacts of climate change, there is a need for systematic research on the specific effects of climate change on different horticultural crops in the state (Aggarwal, 2018).

In light of the above, the present study aims to answer the questions: what are the major climatic changes perceived by the peach farmers in Rajgarh?; what are the key impacts of climatic changes on peach farmers in Rajgarh?; how do these climatic challenges affect their farming practices?; how does climate change impact the social and economic well-

being of peach farmers in Rajgarh?; and what adaptation strategies are most effective in mitigating the climate change impacts in Rajgarh, Sirmaur district, Himachal Pradesh? By understanding the impacts of climate change on peach cultivation in this region, this study would support formulation of strategies for improving the resilience and sustainability of peach farming in the face of climate change.

Objectives, Data Sources and Research Methodology

The paper has three major objectives: (1) to analyse the major climatic changes perceived by the peach farmers in Rajgarh; (2) to identify the key impacts of climatic changes on peach farmers and their socio-economic well-being in Rajgarh; and (3) to examine the adaptation strategies to mitigate the climate change impacts.

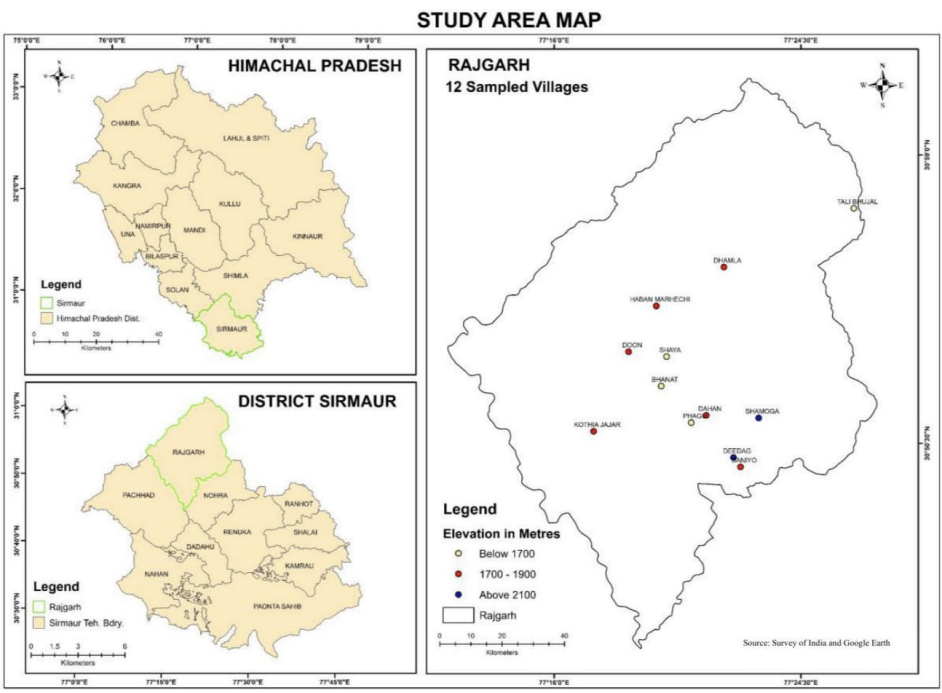
The present study was carried out in Rajgarh tehsil of Sirmaur district, Himachal Pradesh (Map 1), a region often referred to as the "Peach Bowl of Asia" due to its long history and large area under peach cultivation. The tehsil is located in the south-eastern part of Himachal Pradesh, bordering Solan and Shimla districts, and lies in the Shivalik foothills of the outer Himalayas. The area is well connected by road with Solan, Shimla, and Chandigarh, which provides farmers access to nearby markets.

The study is entirely based on the primary data collected from 70 peach farmers spreading over 12 villages of different elevation in Rajgarh tehsil, district Sirmaur, Himachal Pradesh. Respondents were selected through purposive-cum-random sampling technique where village was chosen purposively at the 1st stage and then random selection of farmers of different categories of landholding, with some owning 4–5 bighas, others 5–10 bighas, and a few cultivating on 10–15 bighas of land, at the 2nd stage. This variation ensured that perceptions of climatic changes by small, medium and relatively larger orchard farmers observed overtime (10-15 years) be included in the study frame. Data were collected through a structured interview schedule with face-to-face interviews during the field visits and followed up by telephonic interactions with farmers.

Secondary data were also referred from government horticulture records and climatic data of the region.

The responses were tabulated and analyzed in terms of frequency and percentage, which helped in understanding the farmer's perception of major climatic changes, their impacts on peach farming and socio-economic impacts on peach growers. The socio-economic fabric of the area is strongly tied to peach farming, with many families relying on it as their main source of cash income. Changing climatic conditions have, therefore, not only affected the agro-ecological suitability of peach orchards but have also threatened the livelihood security of farming households. While the study is limited to 70 respondents, it provides a reliable insight into the ground realities of climatic change and peach farming in Rajgarh

Map 1



Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the research paper, highlighting the key results and their discussion. The results are organized into four main sections, each focusing on a specific aspect of the investigation.

Section 1: Climate Changes Perceived and Their Impact on Peach Farmers in Rajgarh

This section examined the climatic factors influencing peach cultivation in Rajgarh, highlighting trends and shift in environmental variables.

Table 1
Climate Changes Perceived and Their Impact on Peach Farmers in Rajgarh, 2025

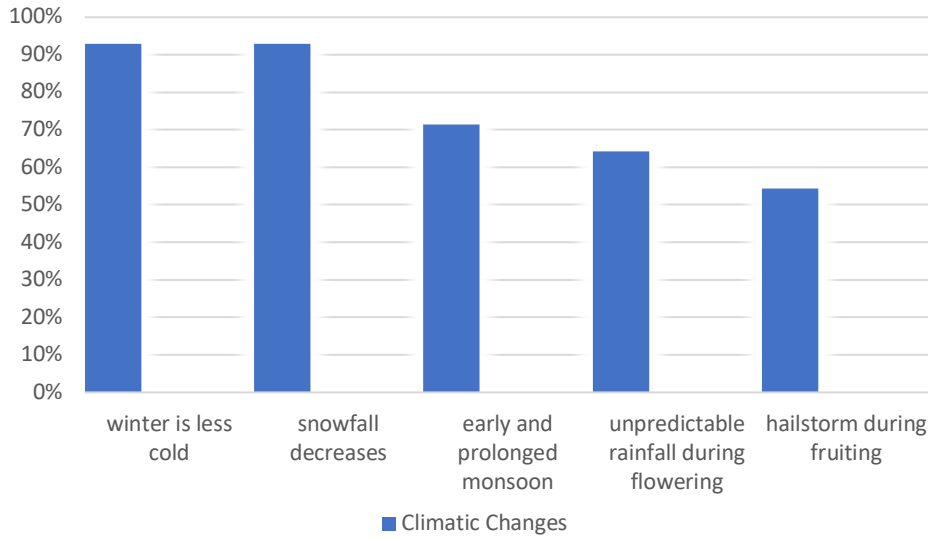
Climatic Condition	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)	Observed Trends
Winter is less cold	65	92.9%	Reduced chilling hours, poor flowering & more pests.
Snowfall decreases	65	92.9%	Insects/diseases survive, tree health declines.
Early and prolonged monsoon	50	71.4%	Disease spread (e.g., phytoplasma), fruit damage.
Unpredictable rainfall during flowering	45	64.3%	Flower drop, low fruit set.
Hailstorm during fruiting	38	54.3%	Fruit damage, lower market value.

Source: Field Survey, July-August 2025

The responses in table 1 clearly indicate that the climate change has significantly altered the conditions for peach cultivation in Rajgarh. A large majority of farmers (92.9 percent of the farmers) observed shorter and warmer winters, which means fewer chilling hours are available for peach trees. This directly affects flowering and fruit setting and also helps insect pests survive through winter (Dutta, 2013). Similarly, the decrease in snowfall was reported by the same number of respondents (65 out of 70), again highlighting the shortage of chilling requirement needed for proper peach development in the study area.

Around 71.4 percent respondents noted that the monsoon has become early and prolonged, which increases the spread of pests and diseases such as phytoplasma and stem borer, besides creating waterlogging in orchards (Figure 1). Unpredictable rainfall during flowering (64.3 percent) was reported as a major issue, as it causes flower drop, leading to lower yields. In addition, hailstorms during fruiting (54.3 percent) cause direct damage to fruits, leaving scars and reducing their market value. Overall, the results show that the changing climatic conditions have negatively affected both the productivity and quality of peaches in the region. Similar trends have been reported in earlier studies, where climate variability was shown to reduce productivity and increase pest and disease incidence in fruit crops (Awasthi et al., 2001; Bose & Mitra, 1996; Chawla et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2024). Research in Himachal Pradesh and elsewhere also highlights rising temperatures, inadequate chilling, and shifting pest dynamics as major threats to peach and other horticultural crops (Rana et al., 2011; Malhotra, 2017; Vanalli et al., 2023, Kaur & Singh, 2021, Kaur, 2022).

Figure 1: Climate Changes Perceived by Peach Farmers in Rajgarh, 2025



Source: Field Survey, July-August

Peach farmers in Rajgarh faced various challenges due to climate change. This section outlines the primary obstacles faced by farmers, including pest, disease, tree damage, changes in production etc.

Table 2

Challenges Faced by Peach Farmers in Rajgarh, 2025

Challenges	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)	Observed Trends
Rising pest & disease attack	61	87.1%	Poor fruit quality, orchards weaken.
High tree mortality & shorter orchard life	55	78.6%	20-30 trees die per farmer each year, orchard life reduced.

Decline in production and yield	60	85.7%	Lower harvests every year, reduced income.
Unsuitable at low altitude	44	62.9%	Orchards survive only at higher altitude.
Source: Field Survey, July-August 2025			

The impacts shown in table 2 also reflect changes that have intensified over the past decade due to climate variability. Farmers consistently mentioned that orchard conditions were comparatively better 8-10 years ago, when fruit quality was higher, tree mortality was lower, and orchards at mid- altitude were still productive. At present, majority of respondents (87.1%) reported rising pest and disease attacks, particularly due to stem borer infestation and phytoplasma disease. Phytoplasma disease frequently mentioned by farmers. Phytoplasma, a wall-less bacterial pathogen transmitted by leafhoppers, causes stunted growth, yellowing, and eventual death of peach trees, significantly weakening orchards (Jarial et al., 2015). Over 78 percent of the farmers reported that once orchards are affected, production falls continuously and trees eventually die. The farmers' perception of declining yields in Rajgarh corresponds with news reports documenting an 85 percent reduction in peach production over the last 25 years (Himdarshan Samachar, 2025). In severe cases, entire orchards have been cleared because of phytoplasma, forcing farmers to shift towards other crops.

Another important pest problem is the stem borer. Farmers described how the insect bores into the trunk and branches, creating tunnels that weaken the vascular system. Affected trees show gum exudation, drying of branches, and eventually die if not managed. Stem borer infestation, when

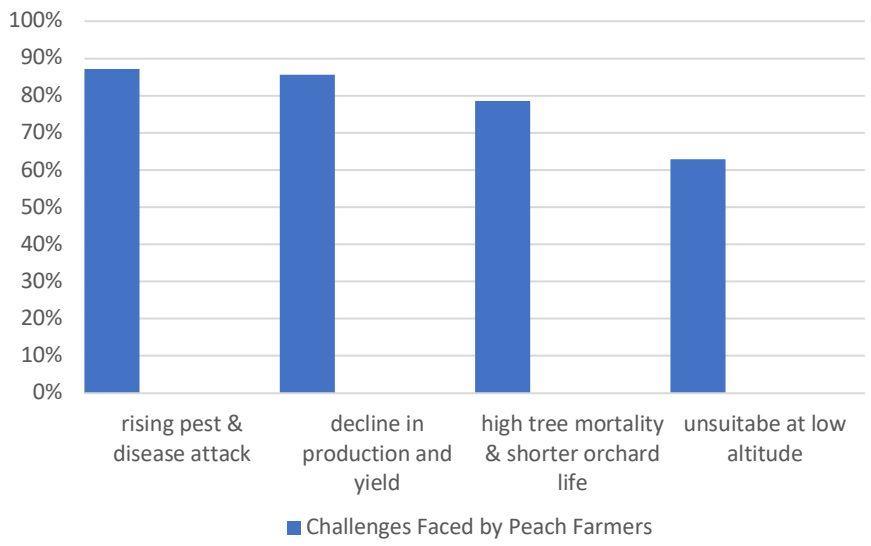
combined with phytoplasma, drastically shortens the productive life of orchards.

A perusal of table 2 showed that high tree mortality (reported by 78.6 percent farmers) has also reduced the productive life of orchards, with each farmer losing between 20–30 trees annually. Consequently, overall production and yield have declined (85.7%), further reducing farm-level income. Farmers emphasized the perishability of peach fruits, noting that peaches can only be stored for 2–3 days. Farmers emphasized the perishability of peach fruits, noting that peaches can only be stored for 2–3 days due to hot and humid conditions. Fruits that ripen during the rainy season absorb excess water, making them soft, less tasty, and highly prone to rotting before reaching markets. Moreover, transportation challenges such as poor packaging, long travel distances, and rough roads cause further fruit damage and heavy losses (Raina et al., 2022).

The findings reveal that nearly 63 percent of farmers observed that peaches now perform poorly at low altitudes, restricting cultivation to mid- and high-altitude areas only, due to increasing temperature (Figure 2).

These observations are consistent with earlier studies which also reported that climate change, particularly warming winters and erratic rainfall, reduces fruit quality and increases vulnerability to pests and diseases in horticultural crops (Malhotra, 2017; Sharma, 2025). Similarly, Chawla et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2020 highlighted that high temperatures shorten the shelf life of fruits and aggravate storage and marketing challenges, which aligns with the farmers' experiences in this study.

Figure 2: Challenges Faced by Peach Farmers in Rajgarh, 2025



Source: Field Survey, July-August 2025

Section 2: Climate Change Induced Socio-economic Impacts on Peach Farmers in Rajgarh

This section analyses the effects of changing climatic conditions on income, market, and overall well-being of the farmers in the study area. Table 3 shows the climate change induced socio-economic implications on peach farmers and local communities.

Table 3
Climate Change Induced Socio-economic Impacts on Peach Farmers in Rajgarh, 2025

Socio-economic Impacts	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)	Observed Trends
Low income from peach farming	45	64.3%	Farmers avoid replanting; orchards abandoned.

Weak & declining market	52	74.3%	Price drops, profitability reduced.
Crop shifting (to apple, other fruits, vegetables)	57	81.4%	Peach area steadily declining.
Stressed& livelihood Insecurity	22	31.4%	Farmers expressed anxiety, less motivation to continue peach farming
Source: Field Survey, July-August 2025			

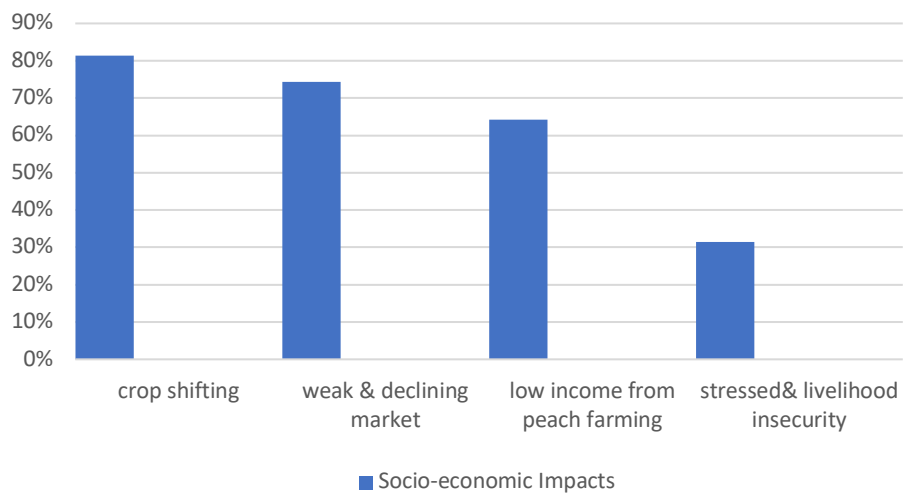
A close look at table 3 reveals serious livelihood concerns among peach farmers. A majority of respondents (81.4%) reported crop shifting to apple, other fruits, or vegetables, indicating that many growers are no longer willing to risk investment in peach orchards due to uncertainty in returns. This trend has resulted in a steady decline in peach area as reported by the selected farmers, and farmers now prefer alternative crops better suited to current climatic conditions. Similarly, 74.3% of farmers highlighted a weak and declining market, with prices dropping and profitability shrinking. As a result, peach cultivation is becoming less attractive, and marketing challenges are discouraging younger farmers from continuing this practice in Rajgarh.

Another significant issue is the low income from peach farming, as reported by 64.3% of farmers (Figure 3). 45 out of 75 farmers responded that the returns from peaches are insufficient to cover the increasing costs of orchard management, leading to situations where orchards are either neglected or completely abandoned. Furthermore, the analysis shows that

the 31.4% of farmers expressed feelings of stress and livelihood insecurity, reflecting the psychological and economic burden caused by declining peach productivity and profitability. Farmers expressed that this uncertainty reduces their motivation to replant orchards or sustain peach cultivation for the future.

Overall, the study highlights that the peach decline is not only a horticultural problem but also a serious socio-economic challenge, forcing farmers toward alternative cropping systems and creating insecurity about long-term livelihoods (Abou-Jawdah et al., 2003).

Figure 3: Climate Change Induced Socio-economic Impacts on Peach Farmers in Rajgarh, 2025



Source: Field Survey, July-August 2025

Section 3: Climate Change and Adaptations for Peach Farmers in Rajgarh

This section explores the adaptations adopted by peach farmers in Rajgarh for mitigating the impacts of climate change.

Table 4
Climate Change and Adaptations for Peach Farmers in Rajgarh, 2025

Adaptations	No of Respondents	Percentage (%)	Observed Trends
Adoption of low chill peach varieties	12	17.1	Very limited, farmers report low profitability.
Use of protective nets/ technology	13	18.5	High cost prevents wider adoption.
Use of chemical sprays for pests/ diseases	58	82.8	Mostly reactive, not preventive, limited effectiveness.
Traditional practices (manure, pruning, local remedies)	27	38.5	Still practices but not sufficient to manage climate impacts.
No major adaptation adopted	42	60	Majority of farmers avoid investment due to low returns.

Source: Field Survey, July-August 2025

The analysis shown in table 4 indicate that the adaptation strategies in peach farming remain very limited in Rajgarh. Only a small number of farmers (17.1%) reported adoption of low-chill peach varieties, but even they emphasized that the returns are not profitable enough to justify large-scale planting. Similarly, the use of protective nets and other technologies

(18.5%) was restricted because of high costs, making them affordable only for a few better-off large farmers.

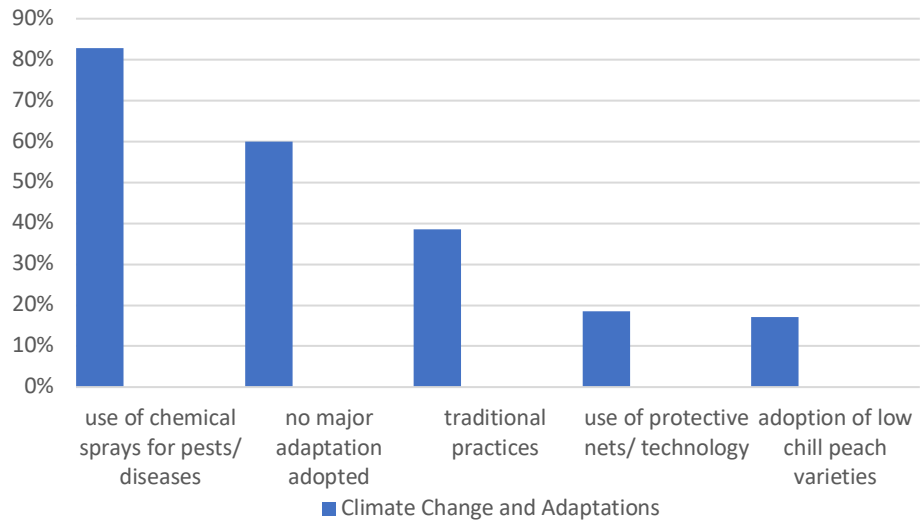
The majority of respondents (82.8%) relied on chemical sprays to manage pests and diseases arousing out of increasing hot and humid conditions due to increasing temperature and rainfall in the area. However, farmers admitted that these measures are largely reactive rather than preventive. In many cases, by the time pests such as stem borers or diseases like phytoplasma were identified, significant damage had already occurred. Chemical use, while common, was reported as only partially effective and costly.

Traditional practices such as application of farmyard manure, pruning, and local remedies were still followed by one third (38.5%) farmers. These methods were important for orchards maintenance but were insufficient to deal with new challenges such as erratic rainfall, fruit perishability, or new pest attacks.

A large proportion of farmers (60%) admitted that they had not adopted any major adaptation strategy (Figure 4). The main reason was the low profitability of peach farming, which discouraged investment in improved practices or technologies. Many also expressed that since peaches are highly perishable (storage limit of 2–3 days) and easily damaged during transportation, spending extra on adaptation does not guarantee the better returns.

The study suggests that while farmers are aware of possible strategies, the economic risks and weak market conditions prevent them from making significant investments (Raina et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2020). Without external support—such as subsidies for protective nets, access to resistant varieties, or improved storage and marketing infrastructure—adaptation in peach farming is likely to remain minimal as reported by the farmers.

Figure 4: Climate Change and Adaptations for Peach Farmers in Rajgarh, 2025



Source: Field Survey, July-August 2025

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study highlights the serious impacts of changing climatic conditions on peach cultivation in Rajgarh area of Sirmaur district, Himachal Pradesh. The findings based on primary data collected from farmers reveal that the climatic variability, including increasing winter temperature and erratic-cum-intensive rainfall during the fruit ripening stage followed by rising pest and disease attacks, shortened orchard life due to high tree mortality and increasing unsuitability of peach cultivation at low altitude, have significantly reduced peach productivity in Rajgarh. The perishability of the crop further aggravates the situation, as fruits ripened during rainfall are more prone to rotting and cannot be stored for longer period, leading to heavy post-harvest losses during the transportation and marketing.

Socio-economic impacts are equally severe, with nearly sixty percent of the farmers reporting low income from peach farming, while many have abandoned orchards or shifted to other crops such as apple, vegetables, crops etc. Diseases like phytoplasma and pests such as stem borer have worsened orchard decline, forcing some farmers to clear entire peach plantations. Adaptation strategies remain very limited, with only a small section of farmers experimenting with low-chill varieties, protective nets, or improved technologies, while the majority avoid reinvestment due to low profitability of peach cultivation in Rajgarh.

Overall, the study concludes that peach cultivation, once a dominant livelihood source in Rajgarh, has now been under severe threat from both climatic stresses and economic pressures. Without adequate policy support, technological interventions and market strengthening, the sustainability of peach farming in the region remains uncertain, and further decline of this important horticultural crop is highly likely.

To address these issues, farmers need support through climate smart agriculture schemes from government, development and provision of pest and disease resistant and low-chill varieties at affordable rates, provision of cold storage and better transportation facilities, and training in orchard management. Government and research institutions should encourage protective technologies, financial incentives, strengthen local markets and insurance against market fluctuations to restore confidence in peach farming. By adopting these measures, peach cultivation in Rajgarh can be made more sustainable and profitable in the long run.

Acknowledgments

We sincerely thank all the selected respondent farmers of Rajgarh for their assistance in data acquisition. We are grateful to them for their cooperation and support in providing us required information during the field survey.

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Panjab University Research Journal (Arts)
VOL. LVI 74-88 (July-December 2025) *ISSN: 0970-5260*

Students' Attitude towards Research: A Study of Post-Graduate Students at Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University, West Bengal

PRITAM RAJAK & MALAY KUMAR GAYEN

Abstract

Research is the key element for the social, political and economic development of a nation. Building a research attitude among students is essential for nurturing young minds. This study investigates the attitudes of post-graduate students towards research. To achieve its objectives, a survey was conducted on a sample of 96 post-graduate students from various departments of Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University, West Bengal. A standardized tool, the Attitude Scale Towards Research (ASTR-SVSY) developed by Vishal Sood and Y. K. Sharma, was used for data collection. The findings revealed that there is no significant difference in the attitudes of post-graduate students towards research with respect to gender, stream and location. However, the study reported that the social status of the students significantly influences their attitude towards research. Therefore, it is suggested that engaging post-graduate students in various research activities is essential for building a positive research attitude. For this purpose, higher education institutions could organize periodic workshops, seminars, short-term training programs or internships within their premises.

Keyword: Attitude, Research, Post-Graduate Students, Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University.

Introduction:

In today's landscape of higher education, research stands as a critical pillar upholding the advancement of knowledge, fostering intellectual growth and driving innovation (Gyuris, 2018). Defined as a systematic, methodological process for gathering, analyzing, and interpreting information, research enables deeper understanding of complex topics and provides solutions to a specific problem (Adu & Boaduo, 2011; Mukherjee, 2019). Consequently, research remains the essential engine for societal progress and serves as one of the most important indicators of development (Belcher et al., 2024). So, it is considered as the backbone of academic inquiry, innovation and information decision-making.

However, the quality of research in social sciences, particularly within the Indian context, has shown signs of decline (Bhagat & Sahi, 2018). Multiple factors contribute to this trend, including personal, emotional, financial, structural, and administrative challenges faced by researchers (Kathuria, 2021). Additionally, students' socio-economic backgrounds, cultural disparities, and geographic localities notably influence their attitude towards research (Singh & Gupta, 2024). For instance, studies indicate that urban students tend to indicate more positive attitudes compared to their rural counterparts. Cultivating favorable research attitudes is crucial, especially at the postgraduate level where students transition from passively receiving information to actively generating new knowledge (Gyuris, 2018; Pandey & Singh, 2023). Further research highlights that postgraduate students often possess a more positive perspective on research than doctoral scholars (Bachhar & Mondal, 2021).

In this context, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) play a pivotal role in nurturing research attitudes among students (Adeleke et al., 2023; Sharma, 2018). As universities strive to produce graduates equipped to address multifaceted societal challenges, the capacity and willingness of students to engage in research becomes increasingly significant. The attitudes of

postgraduate students towards research, therefore, are integral not only to their personal academic success, but also to an institution's broader mission of fostering a culture of inquiry and evidence-based practice (Kaur, 2015; Pandey & Singh, 2023).

Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University is a state university located in the heart of Cooch Behar City, West Bengal. The city is situated in the northern part of the state West Bengal. As a public university serving a diverse student population across a wide range of postgraduate programs, including humanities, social sciences, commerce, and sciences, the need to understand students' research attitudes is both practical and scholarly. Such exploration is essential for curriculum development, pedagogical improvement, and empowering students in their future academic and professional journeys (Bachhar & Mondal, 2021).

The primary objective of this paper is to examine postgraduate students' attitudes towards research at Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University. As this university predominantly attracts students from rural backgrounds, this study will consider variables such as gender, academic stream, geographic location, and social status to gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing research attitudes.

Review of related studies:

Building research attitude among postgraduate students is a crucial responsibility of higher education institutions, and policy makers emphasize the need to strengthen research skills at both graduate and postgraduate levels. To better understand students' research attitudes, several studies have been conducted in India and abroad.

Mishra et al., (2025**)** reported that a large proportion of postgraduate students (96.5%) were aware of the mandatory requirement for Institutional Ethical Committee (IEC) approval in medical research, reflecting a baseline awareness of research protocols.

Gender-related differences in attitudes toward research have also been examined. Shaukat et al., (2014) found that male students demonstrated significantly more positive attitudes towards research compared to females, a finding that was also supported by Kaur, (2015). Conversely, Roul, (2018) found no significant gender differences but observed that Arts students exhibited more positive attitudes compared to Science students. In contrast, Pandey & Singh, (2023) argued that students from science streams showed stronger research attitudes than those from Arts streams, highlighting inconsistencies that may reflect contextual or institutional differences.

Beyond demographic and disciplinary factors, attitudinal dimensions also shape research orientation. Abun et al., (2019) reported a correlation between cognitive and affective attitudes, both positive and negative, towards research and students' actual intentions to undertake research. This suggests that understanding not only demographic but also psychological determinants is essential in promoting stronger research culture among postgraduate students.

Study objectives:

After reviewing the relevant literature, the researchers formulated the following objectives:

1. To investigate the attitudes of Post-Graduate Students towards research.
2. To compare the attitude of Post-Graduate students towards research with respect to gender, academic stream, location and social status.

Hypotheses of the study:

Keeping the above objectives in mind, the following research hypotheses have been framed:

> **$H_0$1:** There is no significant difference between male and female PG students in their attitude towards research.

$H_0$2: There is no significant differences between Arts and Non-Arts (Science and Commerce) PG students in their attitude towards research.

$H_0$3: There is no significant difference between urban and rural PG students in their attitude towards research.

$H_0$4: There is no significant difference between Socially Backward and Non-Backward PG students in their attitude towards research.

Methodology:

In this study, researchers employed the descriptive survey method within a quantitative research framework. The sample consisted of 96 postgraduate students, including 32 male and 64 female students. The population of the study comprised postgraduate students of Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University, West Bengal. Data were collected online, where the researcher distributed the ASTR-SVSY scale through Google Forms. The ASTR-SVSY scale is a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Undecided, 4 = Disagree, 5 = Strongly Disagree) consisting of 42 statements, of which 16 are negatively worded and 26 are positively worded. After data collection, the researcher tabulated and analyzed the responses using descriptive statistics and the independent samples t-test.

Tool used:

The Attitude Scale Towards Research (ASTR-SVSY) scale was administered in this study. The scale was standardized and developed by Vishal Sood and Y.K. Sharma. The questionnaire is consists of 42 items, of which 42 are positive items and 16 are negative items.

Analysis and interpretations:

A total of 96 postgraduate students from different streams participated in the test. All the responses were recorded in MS excel and the null

hypotheses were tested accordingly. The demographic details of the respondent are presented below:

Table 1

Demographic details of the Respondents

Main Variable	Categorical Variable	No. of Respondents	Total Respondents
Gender	Male	32	96
	Female	64	
Stream	Arts	49	96
	Non-Arts (Science and Commerce)	47	
Location	Urban	26	96
	Rural	70	
Social Status	Socially Non-Backward	61	96
	Socially Backward	35	

According to Table 1, the participation of female students was higher than that of male students. In addition, the majority of respondents belonged to rural areas and most of the students were classified as socially non-backward.

For data analysis, both descriptive and inferential statistics were employed. Descriptive statistics include the Mean and SD. To determine mean differences in the attitudes of postgraduate students toward research, the t-test was applies. The null hypotheses tested in this regard are as follows:

Ho1: There is no significant difference between male and female PG students in their attitude towards research.

Table 2

Significant Mean Difference between Male and Female PG Students towards Research

Gender	n	Mean	SD	df	t	P	Hypothesis
Male	32	147.906	13.259	94	.189*	0.85	Retained
Female	64	147.328	13.879				
* Not Significant at 0.05 level of significance							

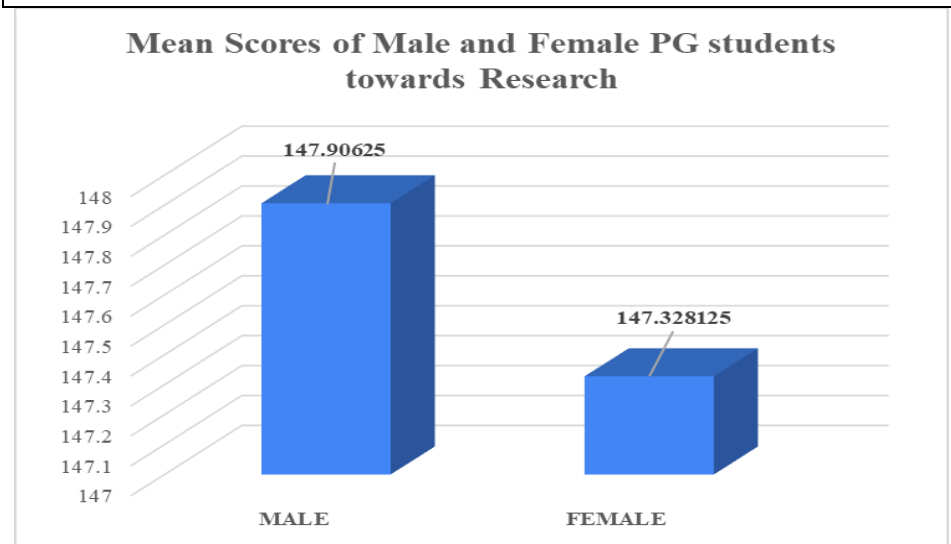

Figure 1: Mean Comparison between Male and Female PG Students towards Research

Table 2 presents the mean and standard deviation (SD) scores reflecting the attitudes of male and female postgraduate (PG) students towards research. Male students had a mean score of 147.9 (SD = 13.25), while female students had a slightly lower mean score of 147.32 (SD = 13.87). Despite this minor difference, the calculated values ($t = 0.189$, $p = 0.85$, $p > 0.05$) indicate no statistically significant difference at the 0.05 level of significance. Therefore, the null hypothesis (H01) is retained, suggesting that there is no significant difference between the attitudes of male and female PG students towards research.

Ho2: There is no significant differences between Arts and Non-Arts (Science and Commerce) PG students in their attitude towards research.

Table 3

Significant Mean difference between Arts and Non-Arts (Science and Commerce) PG Students' Attitude towards Research

Stream	n	Mean	SD	df	t	P	Hypothesis
Arts	49	147.755	13.259	94	.172*	0.863	Retained
Non-Arts (Science and Commerce)	47	147.276	13.879				
*** Not Significant at 0.05 level of significance**							

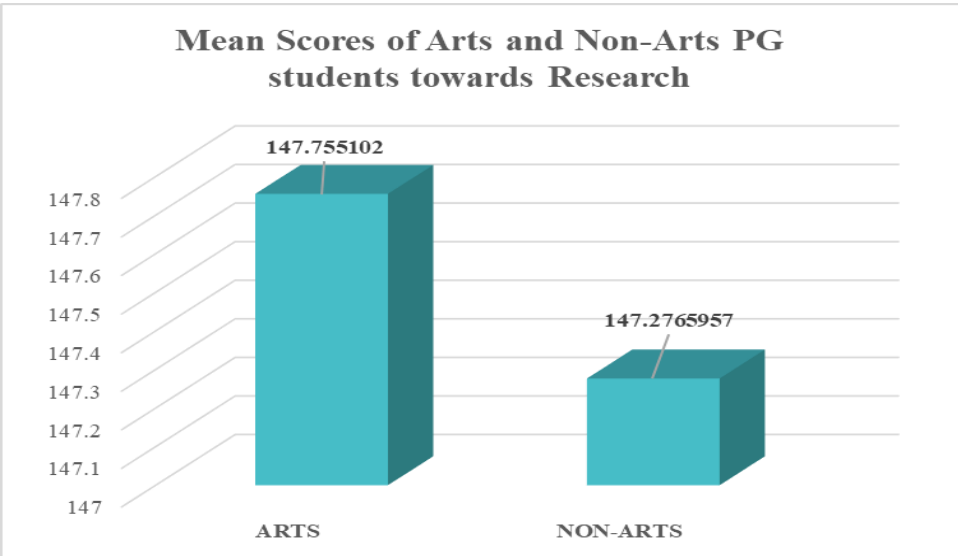

Figure 2: Mean Comparison between Arts and Non-Arts PG Students' Attitude towards Research

Table 3 shows the mean difference between the Arts and Non-Arts (Science and Commerce) PG students' attitude towards research. The data reveals

that the calculated t-value (0.172) for $H_0$2 is not significant at 0.05 level of significance (p=0.863). So, there is no significant difference exist between the Arts (Mean= 147.75 and SD= 13.25) and Non-Arts (147.276, SD= 13.879) streams PG students in their attitudes towards research. The null hypothesis ($H_0$2) is, therefore, retained and concluded that students' academic streams does not influence the attitude towards research.

Ho3: There is no significant difference between the attitude of PG students towards Research based on their location.

Table 4

Significant Mean difference between Rural and Urban PG Students' Attitude towards Research

Area	n	Mean	SD	df	t	P	Hypothesis
Rural	63	146.48	14.36	94	1.119*	0.266	Retained
Urban	33	149.52	11.62				
*** Not Significant at 0.05 level of significance**							

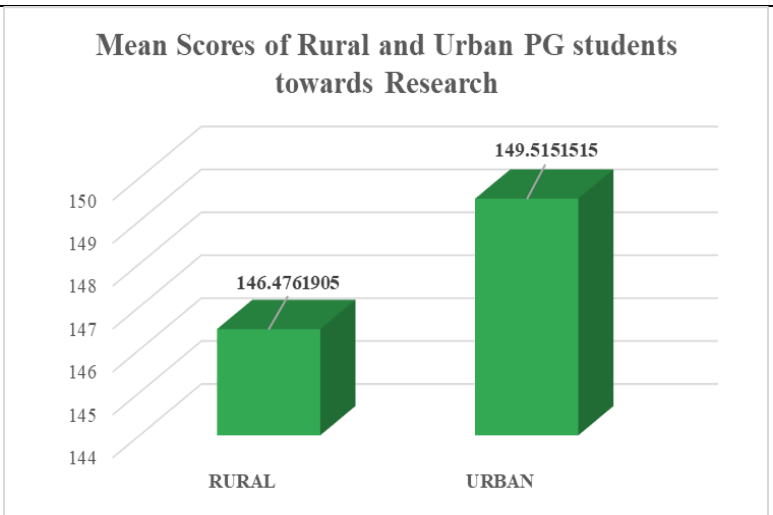

Figure 3: Mean Comparison between Rural and Urban PG Students towards Research

Table 4 illustrates the difference in attitudes between rural and urban PG students. The results show a non-significant difference ($t = 1.119$, $p = 0.266$, $p > 0.05$). Rural students reported a mean attitude score of 146.48 (SD = 14.36), whereas urban students scored slightly higher with a mean of 149.52 (SD = 11.62). As this difference is not statistically significant, the null hypothesis (H03) was retained.

Ho4: There is no significant difference between the attitude of PG students towards Research based on their social status.

Table 5

Significant Mean difference between Socially Backward and Non-Backward PG Students' Attitude towards Research

Social Status	n	Mean	SD	df	t	P	Hypothesis
Socially Backward	35	142.6	11.288	94	2.965*	0.004	Not Retained
Socially Non-Backward	61	150.344	13.928				

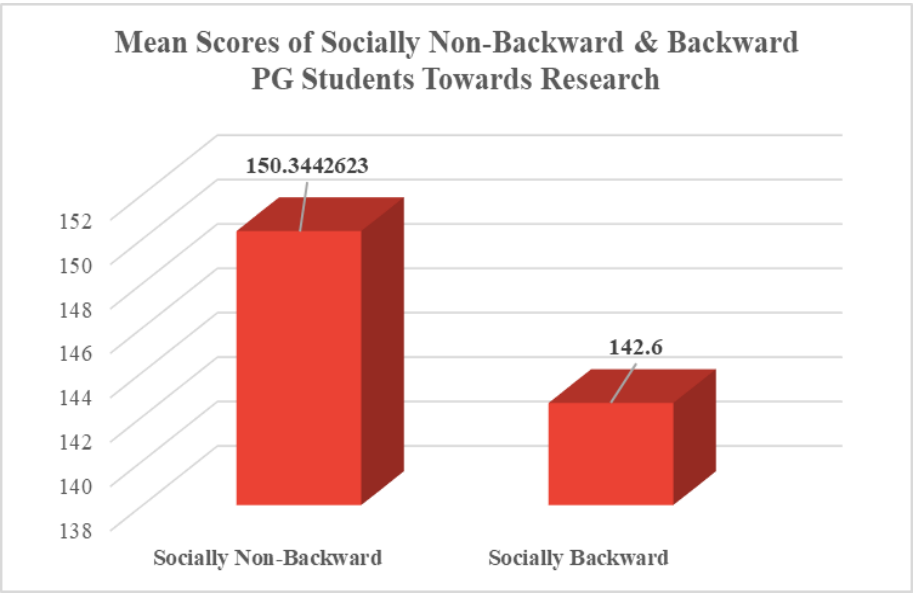

Figure 4: Mean Comparison between Socially Non-Backward and Backward PG Students towards Research

As shown in the Table 5, the computed t-value for the attitudes of postgraduate (PG) students belonging to socially Non-Backward and Backward categories, is 2.965 (t) with a p-value of 0.004 ($p < 0.05$). Thus, at the 0.05 level of significance, the obtained t-value is statistically significant. Therefore, the null hypothesis ($H_0$4) is rejected and we may conclude that there exists a significant difference between the attitudes of PG students belonging to socially Non-Backward and Backward categories towards research. From the figure 4, it is clearly indicates that the mean score of PG students from the socially Non-Backward group (150.344) is much higher than the students from the socially Backward (142.600).

Major findings:

Based on the above analysis, the following are the major findings:

1. Gender does not significantly influence PG students' attitude towards research.
2. Academic stream does not significantly influence PG students' attitude towards research.
3. Place of residence (rural or urban) does not significantly influence PG students' attitude towards research.
4. Social status is a significant factor influencing PG students' attitude towards research.

Conclusion:

At the end of the whole research work, the researchers concludes that post-graduate students generally exhibit a positive attitude towards research, though the degree of this attitude varies, some students demonstrate stronger engagement, while some shows poor interest. The study found no significant difference in research attitudes between male and female students, between Arts and Science/Commerce stream students, or between students from rural and urban areas. However, a significant difference was observed between socially backward and socially non-backward students, with the latter showing a more positive attitude towards research. To address such disparities, orientation and awareness programmes on research should be introduced at the undergraduate level, fostering a research-oriented environment from the beginning of college life. Students' perspectives on research must be improved through continuous motivation and exposure. In line with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, postgraduate students should be equipped with skills in writing research articles and project reports, enabling them to approach research with

confidence and contribute meaningfully across various sectors. In a world where we face new challenges daily, research serves as a vital tool for problem-solving and innovation.

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Panjab University Research Journal (Arts)
VOL. LVI 89-118 (July-December 2025) *ISSN: 0970-5260*

Between Stigma and Silence: Unseen Burdens of Psychiatric Caregiving in Himachal Pradesh

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Abstract

This paper uniquely explores not only the stigma faced by psychiatric caregivers but also the enforced silence that shapes their daily lives and relationships in Himachal Pradesh. While caregivers of individuals with cancer or paralysis frequently receive sympathy and communal support, those tending to psychiatric illnesses encounter shame, social withdrawal, and institutional neglect—a contradiction most striking in Himachal Pradesh, where hilly geography, rural isolation, and close-knit community networks amplify the visibility of illness and accelerate the circulation of stigma. Drawing on primary qualitative data from five caregiver case studies at Indira Gandhi Medical College (IGMC), Shimla, this study examines how stigma and silence shape the everyday lived experiences of psychiatric caregivers. Through thematic analysis, three interlinked themes emerged: the tension between social sympathy for physical ailments and stigmatisation toward mental illness; the profound social isolation experienced within families and communities; and the fragile, often solitary coping strategies caregivers develop in the absence of systemic support. By situating these findings within sociological frameworks—including deviance, role strain, and gendered expectations—the paper demonstrates that caregiver struggles are not individual failings but socially produced realities embedded in structural inequalities. The findings carry urgent policy relevance for India, Himachal Pradesh, and global commitments

under the Sustainable Development Goals, highlighting the critical need for community sensitisation, institutional support systems, and formal recognition of caregivers as vital stakeholders in mental health care.

Keywords: Psychiatric Caregiving, Stigma, Silence, Social Isolation, Caregiver Burden, Himachal Pradesh, Gendered Caregiving, Mental Health Policy, Qualitative Research

Introduction

Caregiving for individuals with psychiatric illnesses in India is frequently rendered as an invisible and demanding labour—an act of quiet endurance carried out within families, predominantly by women, that sustains patients in the absence of robust institutional support. In the case of psychiatric illnesses, this already-challenging labour is compounded by the heavy shadow of stigma, which extends far beyond the patient to envelop their entire family, but most acutely their primary caregivers.

While caregivers of patients with visible diseases such as cancer or paralysis frequently receive empathy, public recognition, and communal support, those who tend to psychiatric patients encounter silence, whispered judgments, and outright exclusion from social spaces. This profound duality—sympathy for physical illness versus stigma for mental illness—has been documented across diverse global contexts. However, it becomes especially pronounced in India, where deep cultural beliefs about mental illness, limited mental health literacy, and tightly knit community networks collectively shape social responses to psychiatric caregiving.

The scale of this challenge is staggering. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), globally, 970 million people were living with a mental disorder in 2019, representing approximately one in eight individuals. Yet mental health systems remain significantly under-resourced, especially in low- and middle-income countries where

government spending averages just 2% of total health budgets and mental health professionals are scarce. In India, the treatment gap for common mental disorders ranges between 70% and 92%, reflecting enormous unmet needs and placing a disproportionate burden on family caregivers to fill the gap. Studies across India confirm that caregiver burden is both widespread and severe: a meta-analysis reports that 35.9% of caregivers of individuals with psychosis experience significant burden, while another study found that approximately 60% of caregivers experience moderate to severe levels of burden. Alarmingly, over two-thirds of people with mental health conditions globally do not receive appropriate care, with stigma consistently cited as a major barrier to treatment-seeking and recovery.

Research has consistently shown that caregivers of psychiatric patients experience high levels of burden, psychological distress, and profound social isolation. Terms such as "felt stigma" (the internalisation of shame) and "enacted stigma" (discrimination and rejection by others) are frequently used to capture these layered realities. The stigma is not only personal but profoundly relational, often described as "courtesy stigma," where families and caregivers are marked and judged by association with the psychiatric patient. Such processes intensify the hidden costs of caregiving, making psychiatric care uniquely challenging when compared with other forms of illness management. Importantly, research further suggests that this stigma reduces help-seeking, delays treatment, and undermines the social standing of both patients and their families—creating a vicious cycle where silence becomes a survival strategy.

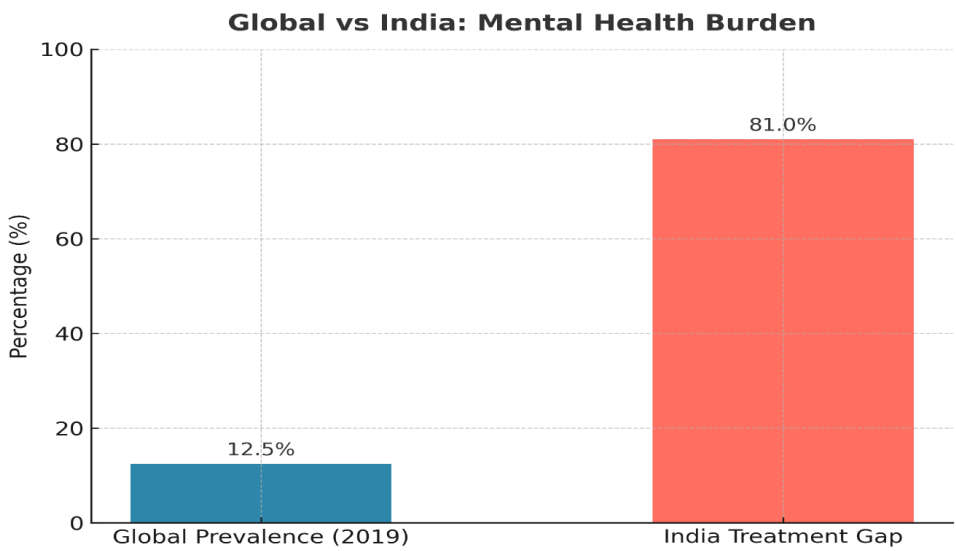

Figure 1. Global prevalence of mental disorders compared with India's treatment gap for common mental disorders

Source: World Health Organisation, 2019

In Himachal Pradesh, these struggles acquire a distinctly acute character shaped by regional geography and social structures. The state's hilly terrain and scattered settlements create formidable difficulties in accessing specialised health services, with Indira Gandhi Medical College (IGMC) in Shimla serving as one of the few tertiary referral centres for psychiatric care in the region. In such a setting, caregivers must navigate not only the daily demands of treatment—including long journeys to hospital visits—but also the intense pressures of rural gossip networks where information spreads rapidly and stigma becomes amplified. The small-town and close-knit village context means that mental illness rarely remains a private family matter; the social gaze becomes relentless and unforgiving for those providing care. These geographical and cultural specificities underscore the critical need for regionally grounded research that situates psychiatric caregiving within the lived realities of families in Himachal Pradesh, rather than generalising from urban, metropolitan studies.

Against this backdrop, the present paper focuses on the lived experiences of caregivers of psychiatric patients in Himachal Pradesh. Drawing on detailed case studies from IGMC Shimla, this study examines three key dimensions: (1) how stigma and silence shape the everyday identities and social positioning of psychiatric caregivers; (2) how social isolation unfolds within family and community contexts; and (3) the fragile and often individualised coping strategies caregivers employ in the absence of systemic recognition or support. By engaging with sociological perspectives on stigma (Goffman, 1963), role strain (Goode, 1960), gendered care expectations (Gilligan, 1982; Tronto, 1993), and emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983), the paper aims to demonstrate that these struggles are not merely personal hardships or individual psychological challenges but are fundamentally shaped by broader social structures, institutional gaps, and cultural norms. In doing so, it calls for greater integration of caregiver concerns into India's National Mental Health Programme (NMHP) and related policy frameworks, alongside targeted efforts to build awareness and support systems at the community and district levels.

Theoretical Framework

Stigma theory, developed by **Erving Goffman (1963**), explains how individuals become socially discredited due to attributes considered undesirable by society. In the context of psychiatric caregiving, families and caregivers are often marked by their association with mental illness, leading to avoidance, gossip, and social exclusion. This framework helps analyse how social labelling in close-knit Himachali communities transforms caregiving from a role of compassion into a socially vulnerable and stigmatised position, reinforcing silence and marginalisation as adaptive responses.

Feminist Care Perspective: Emerging from the works of **Carol Gilligan (1982)** and **Joan Tronto (1993**), feminist care theory highlights how caregiving labor is gendered, structurally undervalued, and systematically rendered invisible in patriarchal societies. Applied to psychiatric

caregiving, it emphasises that women disproportionately bear the responsibility of tending to patients while simultaneously managing household and economic obligations. In this paper, this perspective helps explain how structural inequalities—particularly gendered expectations of female duty and sacrifice—compound the already-heavy burdens of psychiatric caregivers, turning private care into a site of public disadvantage and shame.

Emotional Labor:: Introduced by **Arlie Hochschild (1983**), the concept of emotional labour refers to the regulation and management of feelings to fulfil societal or organisational expectations. Psychiatric caregivers often suppress exhaustion, despair, and frustration and display calmness and composure to maintain family honour or avoid community gossip. Within the Himachali context, this framework illuminates how caregivers conceal their distress in both household and public spaces, carrying an invisible emotional burden that remains wholly unacknowledged by health systems, policy, or community recognition.

Role Strain Theory: Originating in the work of **William J. Goode (1960**), role strain theory posits that psychological and social stress arise when multiple social roles impose incompatible or conflicting demands on a single individual. Psychiatric caregivers exemplify this strain acutely as they juggle competing family responsibilities, intensive caregiving tasks, and economic survival. In Himachal Pradesh, where accessing IGMC often involves long-distance travel and significant loss of income, role strain is intensified, illustrating how caregiving is not a singular role but a convergence of conflicting obligations that create ongoing, cumulative stress.

Review of Literature

Chakrabarti (2016) provided one of the earliest systematic discussions of family caregiving for psychiatric illnesses in India. His review article emphasized that, although Indian families have always been central to the management of psychiatric disorders, the research community has

historically neglected them. Caregivers were found to shoulder multiple responsibilities simultaneously, yet despite this wide-ranging role, caregivers received minimal formal recognition or support. Chakrabarti argued that understanding caregiving in India requires acknowledging cultural expectations of family duty, as well as recognising how these expectations can intensify the psychological burden when there is no institutional backup.

Singh et al. (2016) examined stigma among attendants of individuals with schizophrenia in a hospital-based study. Using structured interviews and standardised scales, the study revealed that caregivers not only experienced high levels of burden but also reported being directly stigmatised by relatives, neighbours, and sometimes health professionals themselves. Importantly, the authors linked stigma to treatment-seeking delays: families often hesitated to disclose symptoms or seek psychiatric services because of anticipated social rejection. Singh and colleagues therefore called for dual strategies—hospital-based interventions to sensitise health staff, and community-based anti-stigma campaigns—to address the relational dimensions of stigma that undermine both patient and caregiver well-being.

Grover et al. (2017) carried out a comparative study across multiple centres in India, assessing stigma among caregivers of patients with schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and depression. Their findings showed that schizophrenia caregivers faced the highest stigma, which was significantly associated with greater psychological morbidity, higher emotional strain, and poorer quality of life. The study underscored how psychiatric caregiving is not uniform: stigma varies by diagnosis, with disorders perceived as "chronic" or "severe" carrying heavier social sanctions. Grover and colleagues stressed that caregiver mental wellness must be integrated into treatment planning, since stigma indirectly affects the patient's recovery trajectory by exhausting caregiver resources.

Koschorke et al. (2017) conducted one of the most influential studies on caregiver stigma in India, employing a mixed-methods design that

combined surveys and qualitative interviews. They distinguished between *felt stigma* (the internalised shame of caregivers), *enacted stigma* (discrimination and rejection by others), and *courtesy stigma* (stigma by association with a psychiatric patient). Their findings revealed that caregivers frequently internalised negative stereotypes about mental illness, which in turn reduced their confidence in seeking services. The qualitative narratives illuminated how stigma permeated daily life, from being avoided at social functions to being blamed for a relative's illness. This study was foundational in showing that caregiver stigma is multi-layered and socially embedded rather than a matter of individual perception alone.

Dijkxhoorn et al. (2022) examined caregiver experiences in a low-income community in Chennai through ethnographic methods. Their research traced how caregivers move through phases of stigma: initial denial, followed by loss of honour within the community, social exclusion, and, for some, eventual personal growth through resilience. They highlighted how poverty, unemployment, and weak social support systems exacerbate stigma, leaving caregivers isolated. Yet the study also noted moments of resistance, where caregivers redefined their roles as advocates for their family members. This nuanced picture complicates the common view of caregivers as only passive victims of stigma, showing instead that they may also find ways to resist and redefine their identities.

Bhutia et al. (2022) conducted a cross-sectional study measuring stigma among psychiatric caregivers in India. They found that more than 90% of respondents reported moderate levels of stigmatising attitudes, including embarrassment, secrecy, and withdrawal from social networks. Interestingly, their findings revealed that caregivers themselves sometimes reproduced stigmatising views about mental illness, suggesting that stigma is internalised and reinforced within families. This demonstrates the cyclical nature of stigma: caregivers both suffer from stigma and, at times, unintentionally perpetuate it, thereby strengthening the very social structures that oppress them.

Gupta (2023) compared psychiatric caregivers with caregivers of people suffering from dermatological illnesses. The study demonstrated that psychiatric caregivers consistently reported higher perceived stigma, with effects on both mental balance and help-seeking behaviour. By choosing dermatological conditions as a comparison, Gupta highlighted how illnesses visible on the body did not provoke the same silence or social exclusion as psychiatric conditions, even though both could be chronic and debilitating. This comparative perspective resonates strongly with the present study's focus on contrasting sympathy for physical illness with stigma for psychiatric caregiving.

Kaur (2023) explored the role of stigma in shaping psychological health service utilisation in India. She found that explanatory models of illness that invoke supernatural causes, fears of being blamed, and confidentiality concerns deter families from approaching psychiatric services. Particularly in rural settings, families preferred silence over disclosure, fearing that stigma would affect not only the patient but also marriage prospects and the family's social standing. This study highlights the role of stigma as a barrier not only to social acceptance but also to effective treatment, underscoring the burdens caregivers must bear alone.

Parry et al. (2025) studied stigma in rural Karnataka and emphasised that caregivers not only faced rejection from community members but also from healthcare providers themselves. Interviews revealed that primary care staff sometimes expressed negative attitudes, reinforcing caregivers' sense of isolation. The study highlighted the institutional dimension of stigma—when those tasked with providing care perpetuate discriminatory attitudes, the caregiver's struggle is compounded. This finding is especially relevant to the Himachal context, where caregivers depend heavily on district-level health staff but often encounter inadequate sensitivity or training.

Bhattacharya (2025) brought a new dimension by examining caregivers of psychiatric patients within the Indian Armed Forces. Using the Explanatory Model Interview Catalogue (EMIC) scale, the study showed that stigma

persisted even within highly structured and disciplined institutions. Caregivers described feelings of shame, fear of career repercussions for their family members, and social withdrawal. This work demonstrates that stigma is systemic and widespread, not confined to rural or low-income contexts, making it a universal challenge in psychiatric caregiving.

Together, these studies highlight that stigma in psychiatric caregiving is multidimensional, relational, and deeply entrenched in cultural and institutional contexts. While comparative studies like Gupta (2023) show that psychiatric caregiving is marked by greater stigma than physical illness caregiving, and while national syntheses document caregiver burden consistently, regionally grounded research—particularly in the context of Himachal Pradesh—remains sparse. Most existing studies are hospital-based or focus on metropolitan areas, leaving significant gaps in understanding how stigma unfolds in rural, mountainous settings where community networks are intimate, gossip networks are powerful, and illness is rarely private. This paper seeks to address that critical gap by foregrounding the lived experiences of psychiatric caregivers in Himachal Pradesh, thereby situating stigma not as an abstract concept but as a lived social reality that requires urgent policy and programmatic attention.

Rationale and Significance of the Study

This study addresses the persistent invisibility of psychiatric caregivers in India, who remain systematically unsupported despite their central and irreplaceable role in sustaining patient treatment, recovery, and well-being. In mountainous regions like Himachal Pradesh, caregiving is uniquely shaped by long travel distances, severely limited psychiatric infrastructure, and the intense pressures of small, highly interdependent communities where stigma is amplified by gossip and social surveillance. By presenting detailed case studies from IGMC Shimla, the research foregrounds caregiving as simultaneously an emotional, psychological struggle and a structural, systemic challenge rooted in institutional neglect.

The significance of this study lies in its dual contribution: first, it draws

critical attention to the persistent gaps in India's National Mental Health Programme (NMHP), which has yet to prioritise the recognition, well-being, and support of caregivers despite their centrality. Second, the study aligns directly with Sustainable Development Goal 3 (SDG 3) on health and well-being and SDG 5 on gender equality, by advocating for formal caregiver recognition, institutional support systems, and community sensitisation. In doing so, it reframes psychiatric caregiving not as a private family obligation alone but as a matter of urgent public concern and collective responsibility.

Research Objectives

- To examine how stigma and silence together shape the lived experiences and identities of caregivers of psychiatric patients at IGMC Shimla, Himachal Pradesh.
- To analyse the social and cultural pressures that deepen and compound the burden of caregiving, including expectations placed disproportionately on certain family members based on gender and kinship.
- To document and study the coping strategies caregivers adopt to manage emotional, social, and structural challenges in the absence of formal institutional support systems.

Research Methodology

Universe of Study

The universe of the present study comprised caregivers of psychiatric patients attending the Department of Psychiatry at Indira Gandhi Medical College (IGMC), Shimla, Himachal Pradesh. As a major tertiary referral center, IGMC draws patients and families from across different districts of the state, making it an appropriate and strategic site for exploring the lived experiences of caregiving in the context of psychiatric illnesses in a mountainous, geographically dispersed region.

Sample

From this universe, five caregivers were purposively selected through intentional sampling to capture diverse experiences and caregiving relationships. Care was taken to include both male and female caregivers, representing different family roles and kinship relationships. The final sample comprised three female caregivers and two male caregivers. This distribution enabled the study to highlight the gendered dimensions of caregiving stigma and burden while maintaining focus on the diversity of lived experiences and coping strategies across gender lines.

Techniques of Data Collection

The primary method of data collection was in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with caregivers. The semi-structured interview schedule employed open-ended questions that encouraged caregivers to narrate their everyday struggles, challenges, and adaptations in their own words, while targeted probes directed attention to experiences of stigma, family and community responses to their caregiving, and the coping strategies they developed. Interviews were complemented with detailed field notes to capture contextual observations, non-verbal cues, emotional expressions, and the physical and social environment of caregiving.

Informal conversations during hospital visits further enriched the narratives and provided contextual depth. The case study method was employed to provide a detailed, holistic, and person-centred understanding of caregiving experiences and their social embeddedness. All participants were informed about the study's objectives and assured that their participation was entirely voluntary. Informed consent was obtained before interviews, and caregivers were assured of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. To protect privacy and ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms have been used throughout the paper for all participants, and identifying details have been modified where necessary.

Data Collection

Case Study 1: Ankita—Daughter Caring for Father with Substance Use Disorder

Ankita, a 23-year-old daughter from rural Shimla, has lived much of her life under the shadow of her father's opioid dependence. While she faithfully accompanies him on the long bus rides to IGMC Shimla for treatment, she carries an invisible burden of stigma at every turn. In her village, whispers of "bad legacy" travelled faster than news of her college results. When a marriage proposal was withdrawn, relatives told her mother bluntly: *"No one wants to tie their daughter to a house of addicts."* Shopkeepers refused to extend credit; even during family weddings, she noticed neighbours avoiding their row in the community gathering space, leaving empty chairs beside her—a visual and spatial marker of exclusion.

The stigma was reinforced at the hospital itself. During one visit, a nurse remarked loudly in front of other patients and visitors, *"Yeh toh aadat waale hote hi hain"* (those addicted are just that way), causing Ankita to shrink into herself while others stared. She confessed*: "I stopped going to weddings because people asked, 'Has he started again?' before saying hello."* For her, caregiving was not merely about monitoring medicines or keeping her father physically safe; it was about absorbing the loss of honour that stained her own social future and marriage prospects. The silence she maintained in public—pretending everything was fine, hiding her father's condition—was less a choice and more a survival strategy in a community where stigma defined her identity as much as her father's illness did.

Case Study 2: Kamla—Wife Caring for Husband with Substance Use Disorder

Kamla, a 32-year-old wife from the outskirts of Shimla, found herself caught between emotional despair and relentless social blame when her husband slipped deeper into opioid dependence. With two small children and only a tailoring job to keep the household afloat, she became the target

of ridicule from neighbours and sharp taunts from her in-laws, who sneered that "a good wife would have kept him straight." She recalled a humiliating moment at the chemist's shop when the pharmacist shouted out her husband's prescription across the crowded counter, as if to ensure the entire queue knew what medication he was taking home. This public exposure of his condition translated directly into public judgment of her as his wife and caregiver.

At one critical point, her landlord threatened eviction after her husband relapsed, claiming the family "spoiled the colony's reputation" and "brought shame" to the building. Kamla admitted painfully: *"They tell me to keep him straight as if I hold a key that locks his hands."* Even at the hospital, health workers scolded her for "not controlling him," reinforcing the deeply internalised belief that his illness was her personal failure, her inadequacy as a wife and caregiver. Yet behind the ridicule lay devastating financial strain: when her husband missed work due to illness, she worked late into the night on her sewing machine, whispering to herself that *"silence was the only way to preserve dignity."* For Kamla, caregiving was less about medically or emotionally tending to her husband's needs and more about managing a relentless social narrative where she was cast as the one to blame for his illness and his addiction.

Case Study 3: Seema—Wife Caring for Husband with Substance Use Disorder and Comorbid Depression

Seema, a 35-year-old wife from a semi-rural apple belt in Shimla, carried what she called "a double shadow" in her marriage. Her husband's long struggle with opioid dependence was already a source of relentless gossip and social exclusion—neighbors refused to invite them to weddings, muttering that "drunks spoil occasions." But when depression crept into his life, making him sleep through the day and withdraw from all activity, the stigma doubled. Addiction was condemned as a moral failure and character weakness; his sadness and listlessness were dismissed as mere laziness and an excuse for not working. Even within her own family, relatives advised

her to "stop pampering him" and scolded her for taking him to IGMC, insisting she was "wasting money" on treatment.

At the hospital, an OPD clerk remarked to her bluntly: *"Pehle nasha chhodaye, phir depression dekhenge"* (First, give up the addiction, then we'll address the depression)—a remark that stayed with Seema as a cruel reminder of how his illness was treated as a moral choice rather than a clinical condition. She spoke with painful clarity*: "If he had TB, they would bring soup. For this, they bring advice. They blame him and they blame me."* Yet she smiled at people to hide her pain, saying: *"It was easier to pretend than to explain why he sleeps all day."* For Seema, caregiving meant navigating the painful space between two stigmas—one visible and publicly condemned, the other invisible and trivialised—while absorbing blame from both the community and the institution.

Case Study 4: Rakesh—Husband Caring for Wife with Schizophrenia

Rakesh, a 40-year-old school clerk from a small town near Shimla, found himself inverting the traditional gender roles that society rigidly expects when his wife was diagnosed with schizophrenia. Suddenly responsible for meals, medication management, household chores, and emotional support, he was mocked by colleagues as "hen-pecked" and ridiculed in the marketplace for doing what was culturally coded as "women's work." At temple fairs and community gatherings, he noticed how people lowered their voices and eyes when his wife walked past; some even suggested he "leave her quietly to restore his honour"—advice that reflected how his role as caregiver was seen as emasculating.

Once, a hospital attendant asked him to bring "the mother or sister instead," saying, *"Ladies samajhti hain"* (women understand these things)—as if his caregiving labour was inherently less valid because he was male. He confessed quietly: *"I learned to cook not because I wanted applause, but because she needed to eat."* The emotional and social strain was

compounded by the silence he maintained about his wife's condition. If he publicly admitted her condition, he feared she would be branded permanently, and their children would suffer social ostracism. For Rakesh, caregiving was not only about managing his wife's psychiatric illness but also about enduring constant role reversal and gender transgression that invited ridicule, mockery, and social suspicion from his peers and neighbours.

Case Study 5: Suresh—Husband Caring for Wife with Depression

Suresh, a 38-year-old government employee, quietly battled the stigma of a distinctly different kind as he cared for his wife with major depression. Her illness was dismissed by most relatives as mere "moodiness" or "weakness," leaving him with neither sympathy nor practical support. Teachers at his child's school once commented, "*Mama should be strong,"* making his daughter feel ashamed of her mother's illness, while his colleagues at work ridiculed him for taking half-days, asking pointedly and skeptically: *"Does your wife have a real illness?"* This trivialization of depression—treating it as less legitimate than physical diseases—created a particular form of pain.

Even the health staff at the primary health centre advised *"thoda vyayam karein"* (a little exercise) instead of taking his wife's symptoms seriously or referring her for proper psychiatric evaluation and treatment. Over time, Suresh withdrew from social gatherings, avoiding moments where casual, careless remarks cut too deep and reinforced his sense of isolation. At home, silence became their daily routine; as he described it: *"It's easier than explaining again and again [to people who don't believe]."* For Suresh, caregiving was not marked by loud taunts or overt ridicule but by the quieter, more insidious stigma of trivialization and delegitimisation—where the sheer lack of recognition hurt as deeply as outright cruelty.

Thematic Data Analysis

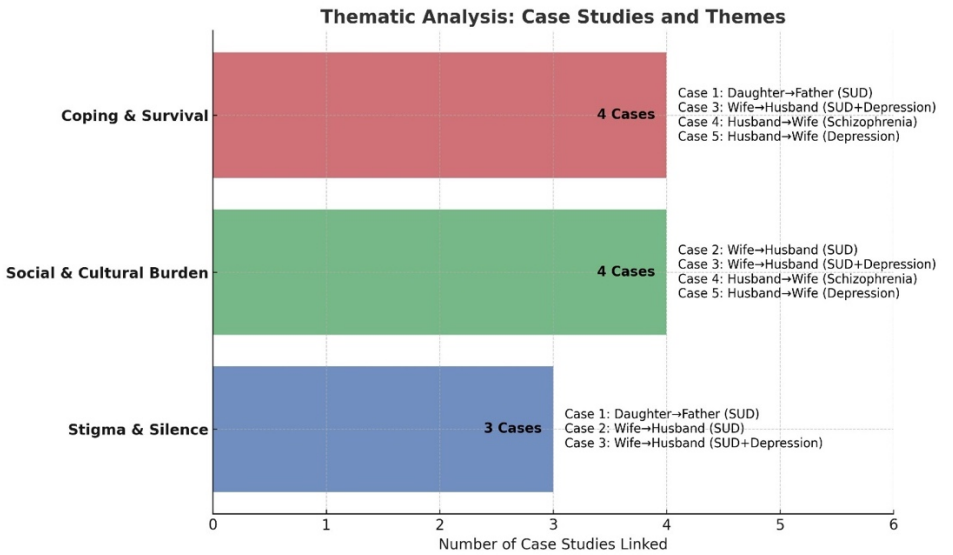

Figure 2: Thematic Analysis: Case Studies

Source: Primary Data

The three core themes identified from the five case studies are: (1) Stigma and Silence, (2) Social and Cultural Burden, and (3) Coping and Survival. Each theme was grounded directly in caregiver narratives and emerged through iterative thematic analysis rather than being imposed externally.

Theme 1: Stigma and Silence

For many caregivers, the stigma of psychiatric illness does not remain confined to the patient; it spills over into the caregiver's own identity and social standing, creating a shadow that follows them everywhere—in family gatherings, at work, in marketplace interactions, and within their own self-perception. Ankita, the young daughter caring for her father with a substance use disorder, recalled vividly how even simple social gatherings turned hostile and exclusionary. She explained, *"At weddings, people don't sit near us. They look as if the disease is catching, as if we brought shame*

with us." Her words illustrate how stigma is communicated not only through overt verbal taunts but through avoidance, spatial exclusion, and non-verbal cues—creating an atmosphere where caregivers feel constantly watched, judged, and found wanting.

Kamla, who supported her husband through opioid dependence, spoke of a different yet equally damaging form of silencing—one rooted in blame and accountability. His family told her, *"You didn't keep him in control. You ruined their name. You failed."* She explained: *"I keep quiet because if I answer, it becomes another fight. Silence is easier than having my failures thrown at me repeatedly."* For her, silence was not consent or acceptance but a protective shield against constant accusations and blame. These examples demonstrate compellingly how stigma reshapes the social standing of caregivers, making them not merely invisible but systematically voiceless within their families and communities.

What should have been a private health challenge became a matter of public judgment and speculation, forcing caregivers to retreat from community spaces—weddings, markets, temples, and social gatherings. This theme highlights that stigma is not experienced only as overt discrimination or cruel verbal insults; it manifests equally through social exclusion, avoidance, subtle cues of dishonour, and the internalised sense of shame. In a state like Himachal Pradesh, where communities are tightly knit and gossip networks are powerful and omnipresent, caregivers often described themselves as "marked" or "stained" in their villages—visibly different and socially diminished. The fear of dishonour and family shame became so heavy that many chose silence over confrontation, erasing their own pain and struggle to avoid further humiliation and social ostracism.

Theme 2: Social and Cultural Burden

Caregiving for psychiatric patients in Himachal Pradesh does not unfold in a vacuum; rather, the pressures of family duty, community gossip, and deeply embedded gendered expectations continually shape and complicate caregiving. For Seema, whose husband struggled with both substance use

and depression, the burden was not only the medical and emotional challenge of managing his erratic moods and behaviours but also the weight of judgment from both kin and community. She explained: *"They tell me he is just lazy, and I'm foolish to defend him. They laugh that I'm covering his weakness by saying he is ill."* Her words reflect how the cultural script around masculinity—where men are expected to be strong providers and earners—rendered depression invisible and made her caregiving appear not as necessary and compassionate labour but as enabling and excuse-making.

This meant her caregiving labour was systematically dismissed and devalued, and her dignity was eroded in the process. Moreover, she was blamed for his addiction by some and for his sadness by others—an impossible position of simultaneous accountability for contradictory illnesses. Rakesh's story brought out a different yet equally troubling layer of cultural burden and gender transgression. As a husband caring for a wife with schizophrenia, he was constantly mocked and derided for stepping into what society rigidly construed as a "woman's role." At his workplace, colleagues sneered that he was "dominated," "whipped," and lacked authority at home. He shared quietly: *"They said a man who cooks and washes is no man at all. But if I don't, who will take care of her? Does she deserve less because she is ill?"* Even at the hospital, where he expected professional sensitivity and support, he was told dismissively to bring a female relative because, as one attendant said, "women understand these things better." For him, caregiving was not simply about love and responsibility; it became a profound challenge to his masculinity and social identity, leaving him doubly isolated—from his workplace peers and from institutional support.

These narratives reveal with striking clarity that the burden of caregiving is profoundly social and cultural, not merely individual or psychological. Women caregivers are routinely blamed for failing to control or discipline their husbands or sons, for allegedly failing to protect family honour, and for their husbands' or sons' illness itself. Men caregivers, conversely, are

ridiculed for breaking rigid gender norms and role expectations, and their caregiving is often delegitimised as somehow less capable or valid than that of female relatives. In tightly knit Himachali communities, gossip spreads with devastating speed and persistence; a single diagnosis can reshape a family's reputation, marriage prospects, and daily social standing. Caregiving thus becomes an exhausting negotiation—not only with the psychiatric illness itself, but with relentless community expectations, family taunts, and institutional insensitivity. What emerges powerfully is that the cultural burden does not merely add an extra layer of stress to caregiving; rather, it fundamentally defines and constrains how caregiving itself is perceived, evaluated, and valued within the community.

Theme 3: Coping and Survival

Despite the crushing weight of stigma and cultural burden, caregivers demonstrated remarkable yet fragile ways of coping that allowed them to endure and continue their caregiving role. Suresh, who cared for his wife with depression while battling trivialization and dismissal, described how he created small private rituals to sustain himself emotionally*: "Every night I write one line of gratitude—even if it's just that she ate with me today, or that we spoke without tension. On days when I feel like breaking, I read those lines and remind myself it's not all darkness."* His coping strategy reflects how caregivers stitched together small fragments of positivity and meaning to counterbalance the invisibility and relentless trivialization of psychiatric illness. These private practices became psychological lifelines.

Seema, overwhelmed by the double burden of her husband's substance use and depression and the shame from all directions, explained how concealment became her primary defence mechanism*: "When neighbours ask, I smile and say everything is fine. If I tell the truth, they will say he is a drunkard and I'm to blame. It is easier to lie than to hear their words and carry that shame home."* Her words reveal starkly that coping often meant hiding rather than healing; silence became a fragile strategy not for genuine healing but for protecting herself and her children from further humiliation

and social consequences.

Other caregivers leaned on fleeting, informal networks of support—an empathetic doctor at IGMC who listened without judgment, a neighbour who occasionally checked in, or peers in hospital corridors who shared similar struggles and validated each other's experiences. These brief moments of recognition and connection reminded them that they were not entirely alone in their struggle. Yet what stands out most vividly across all five cases is that coping was deeply individualised and precarious. There were no strong institutional safety nets, no formal support groups, no community support systems; survival depended almost entirely on small acts of concealment, private rituals, or rare and unpredictable instances of kindness between individuals. These coping strategies may appear fragile or even ineffective by clinical or institutional standards, but in environments where stigma dominated and silence was the norm, they were often the only means available to preserve basic dignity and continue the essential work of caregiving.

Discussion

The five narratives presented in this study reveal caregiving not as a private family duty—a "natural" or "given" responsibility—but as a socially produced struggle shaped fundamentally by stigma, gendered expectations, structural inequalities, and systemic health-system gaps. In Himachal Pradesh, where referral pathways concentrate services at IGMC in Shimla, the combination of tight social networks, geographic distance and isolation, and inadequate public services magnifies exponentially what caregivers must bear emotionally, socially, and economically. The result is a patterned experience across diagnoses: public blame and quiet social withdrawal around substance-use disorders (SUDs); role-reversal ridicule and delegitimisation for male caregivers; and trivialization and dismissal of depressive illness that converts suffering into perceived weakness. These are not isolated sentiments or individual misfortunes; they sit squarely within what caregiver research in India has consistently documented as

"family stigma" and discrimination attached to severe mental illness.

The Himachal Pradesh Context: Need and Resource Mismatch

Himachal Pradesh's landscape reflects both urgent need and severe resource scarcity. The state government itself has acknowledged a population-level mental health stress burden, with recent youth data indicating 15.54% report excessive anxiety and 6.9% report depression—figures that make early help and treatment urgently necessary. Yet these burdens unfold across districts where specialised care remains severely concentrated in urban centres and requires extensive travel. This geographic inequality means that many families have become improvisational, first-line clinics—compensating directly for the absence of local, confidential, accessible support. At the clinical front door, the case-mix realities of our sample align closely with regional epidemiology: a 2020 profile from the Hospital for Mental Health Rehabilitation (HHMHR) in Shimla reported opioid use disorder as the most common diagnosis among new psychiatry outpatient department (OPD) attendees—precisely the disorder at the heart of three of our five case studies. This helps explain why family honour, marriage prospects, and everyday credit in local markets were repeatedly jeopardised in SUD caregiving stories: when substance dependence is prevalent, widely known about, and heavily moralised, courtesy stigma saturates entire households.

Why Stigma Persists: Structure Over Psychology

Our cases show compellingly how stigma persists not because families lack knowledge or understanding of mental illness, but because institutions—hospitals, clinics, communities—perform and reinforce stigma through small, repeated, everyday practices. A nurse remarks loudly about addiction; a pharmacist shouts out a prescription across a crowded counter; an OPD clerk gatekeeps based on perceived moral deservingness; a hospital attendant dismisses a male caregiver as less capable. This is where structural stigma converges with rigid gender order: women spouses are blamed for failing to "control" men, while men who cook, queue for medicines, and offer emotional support are mocked for being "less manly"

or "dominated." The Hindi-belt cultural emphasis on *izzat* (honour and reputation) makes stigma intensely public and persistent; it travels via powerful gossip networks, shows up at weddings and marketplaces, and lingers in housing decisions—as evidenced by Kamla's landlord threatening eviction. Indian caregiver studies focusing on schizophrenia have documented these patterns of shame and exclusion extensively, and our data show parallel and equally damaging patterns in SUD and depression contexts.

Comorbidity and the Stigma Multiplication Effect

Where substance use disorder and depression co-exist, as in Seema's case, caregivers face a particularly cruel double bind. Dependence is condemned as moral failure; depression is minimised as laziness or weakness. These competing and contradictory narratives create a climate where the same family is judged for two opposite stories simultaneously—blamed for enabling addiction and for coddling depression. This is not an idiosyncratic or rare pattern; global and Indian research syntheses note high comorbidity between SUD and common mental disorders, especially depression and anxiety, which complicates both recognition and help-seeking pathways. Our single case with SUD-depression comorbidity exemplifies how the explanatory gap between "vice versus illness" fuels social surveillance, delays treatment-seeking, and isolates spouses and caregivers who must absorb both moral blame and clinical consequences.

System Design for Clinics, Not for Caregivers

India's National Mental Health Survey (2015–16) quantified what our caregivers lived with daily: a 70–92% treatment gap across disorders. Himachal Pradesh's pledges to deploy counsellors and psychiatrists within district structures are welcome and necessary. However, the day-to-day reality for families remains one of long travel distances, episodic OPD contact, minimal continuity of care, and confidentiality breaches in front-desk processes. The District Mental Health Programme (DMHP) remains

the primary vehicle for decentralisation; yet nationally, DMHP teams are significantly understaffed, with psychiatrist availability in many districts far below WHO norms, and services unevenly distributed between urban and rural areas. In such resource-constrained conditions, caregiver labour fills critical gaps—but without recognition, without training, without respite, and without institutional acknowledgement. This invisibility perpetuates the cycle of burden.

Tele-MANAS: A Door That Must Open for Caregivers Too

Himachal Pradesh launched the national Tele-MANAS helpline locally—potentially a critical resource for remote, hilly blocks and scattered populations. Yet, unless caregivers themselves are positioned as explicit users with dedicated protocols for anonymity, secure referral pathways to in-person DMHP teams, and crisis planning, tele-mental health risks becoming another patient-only service lane while caregivers remain invisible. Our cases suggest a distinct institutional need: confidential, caregiver-focused counselling and support that bypasses public waiting rooms where privacy leaks and stigma travel. If Tele-MANAS is meaningfully integrated with district teams and IGMC follow-up services, it could meaningfully reduce travel burden, normalise family psychoeducation, and create a non-judgmental first contact point for relatives struggling in isolation.

The Empathy Gap: Psychiatric versus Physical Illness

Caregivers repeatedly contrasted others' responses to psychiatric illness with reactions to visible physical disease. This empathy gap is well-documented in national caregiver literature: when illness can be framed as morally culpable or a matter of "choice," social support shrinks; when it is legibly biomedical and visible on the body, support expands. In Himachal Pradesh's small communities, this distinction translates directly into public avoidance, marriage-market penalties, and loss of credit—forms of social sanction that are materially consequential for families' survival and dignity. By the time families reach IGMC for treatment, much of the damage is

already social and relational, not merely clinical. Indian caregiver research on schizophrenia documents precisely these life-space restrictions; our SUD and depression cases show parallel patterns, underscoring that family stigma is not a side effect of caregiving but a central and defining determinant of caregiver well-being and help-seeking itself.

Law, Rights, and the Implementation Gap

India's Mental Healthcare Act (2017) enshrines a rights-based approach and theoretically guarantees access to mental healthcare for all. Yet rights language has not yet reshaped front-line interactions: our caregivers described routinely experiencing confidentiality lapses, gendered gatekeeping (dismissing male caregivers, excluding them from treatment decisions), and moralising talk from health staff. Implementation challenges and chronic workforce shortages surface repeatedly in national policy appraisals and professional surveys. Until every OPD counter and pharmacy window practices the Act's spirit—treating both patients and caregivers with dignity and without judgment—families will experience a persistent gap between paper rights and daily practice. For Himachal Pradesh, the policy lever exists and is in place; the barrier is everyday institutional and professional enactment.

Policy Implications

The findings of this study highlight an urgent and non-negotiable need to recognise caregivers formally and systematically as central stakeholders in mental health systems and policy. Major programs such as the National Mental Health Programme (NMHP), the District Mental Health Programme (DMHP), and Tele-MANAS can only succeed in their public health goals if caregivers are explicitly included as beneficiaries and decision-makers rather than treated as invisible extensions of patients.

Institutional Measures: This recognition requires concrete institutional measures: ensuring confidentiality and dignity in OPD waiting areas and pharmacy processes; adopting and enforcing gender-sensitive protocols that

validate both male and female caregivers and recognise diverse caregiving roles; and implementing community-level sensitisation programs through panchayats, self-help groups, and women's collectives (Mahila Mandals) to counter stigma-driven gossip and social exclusion.

Caregiver Support Services: Caregivers themselves must have access to confidential counselling services, peer support networks, and district-level referral pathways that enable them to move beyond concealment and silent endurance. These services must be designed with particular attention to confidentiality and the specific fears caregivers have about public disclosure.

Economic and Structural Support: The economic and structural burdens faced by caregivers demand targeted policy intervention. Travel stipends or accommodation assistance could meaningfully ease the financial strain of families journeying long distances to tertiary centres like IGMC. Workplace policies must incorporate flexible leave provisions and recognition for psychiatric caregiving—an area rarely addressed in India despite its widespread impact. Strengthening DMHP teams by filling critical staff vacancies and strategically decentralising services beyond Shimla would reduce dangerous concentration and bring care closer to rural families.

Policy Alignment: Finally, aligning state-level efforts with India's Mental Healthcare Act (2017) and global commitments under the Sustainable Development Goals—particularly SDG 3 (health and well-being) and SDG 5 (gender equality)—would ensure that the rights and dignity of both patients and caregivers are realised in practice, not merely on paper. Unless caregivers are systematically recognised, meaningfully supported, and actively protected from stigma and institutional neglect, silence will remain their primary coping strategy, and stigma will continue to undermine both individual well-being and collective public health goals.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated with clarity that the weight of psychiatric

caregiving in Himachal Pradesh extends far beyond the technical management of illness; it is an experience profoundly shaped by stigma, social judgment, cultural expectations, and structural neglect. The five case studies revealed vividly how gossip, ridicule, blame, and cultural expectations infiltrated the daily lives of caregivers, systematically silencing their voices and eroding their dignity in their families and communities. The thematic analysis revealed three interconnected patterns: stigma and enforced silence, compounded social and cultural burden, and fragile yet meaningful coping strategies developed in the absence of support.

What emerges most clearly and powerfully is that caregivers are simultaneously invisible yet indispensable actors in the mental health ecosystem. Their hidden, often unrecognised labour sustains patients in the face of inadequate services and institutional gaps, yet their own struggles remain systematically unacknowledged in both policy and practice. By situating their narratives within rigorous sociological frameworks and Himachal Pradesh-specific demographic and epidemiological data, this paper makes visible how stigma is structurally reproduced and how it persists across generations and families.

The findings carry urgent implications for India's mental health landscape and for Himachal Pradesh specifically. Recognising caregivers as central stakeholders in mental health systems, ensuring their confidentiality and dignity in service delivery, and providing them with targeted and meaningful support systems are no longer optional luxuries but necessary and foundational steps toward equitable and humane mental health care. At a time when global commitments such as the Sustainable Development Goals and national frameworks like the Mental Healthcare Act (2017) call explicitly for inclusivity, equity, and human dignity, ignoring caregiver struggles and continuing to render them invisible risks leaving the very foundation of psychiatric care—the family—unsupported and isolated.

Ultimately, the stories of these five caregivers remind us with poignant

clarity that silence is not a natural choice but a coping strategy forced upon them by stigma, institutional neglect, and social indifference. Breaking that silence and dismantling the cycles of stigma requires not merely individual resilience or personal coping but systematic, structural change: policies that recognise, support, and actively protect caregivers as vital partners in the fight against mental illness and in the pursuit of mental health and dignity for all. Only through such systemic transformation can the promise of mental health for all begin to be meaningfully realised in Himachal Pradesh and beyond.

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Panjab University Research Journal (Arts)
VOL. LVI 119-144 (July-December 2025) *ISSN: 0970-5260*

Friends and Neighbours Voting: A Case Study of Narnaund Assembly Constituency in Haryana

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Abstract

Voters are mobilised by 'friends and neighbours' on the ballot. Studies in the western world have deliberated deeply on it; however, very little attention has been given in countries like India. The study attempts to find out the friends and neighbours voting effect in state assembly elections of Haryana. The study was done in the Narnaund assembly constituency of Haryana. Geographical zones were carved out at sub-assembly level for all the contestants in respect to their native villages to analyse the effect. Distribution of vote share and simple regression analysis were done to determine the geographical zone-wise effect in the constituency. The study finds that vote share decreased with the increasing geographical zone or distance from the native village and maximum vote share was found in native villages for all the contestants. Thus, the study found the Local Boy effect and the Distance Decay Effect on voting in the assembly for all the selected contestants with varying degrees.

Keywords: Friends and Neighbours Voting, Distance Decay Effect, Assembly Elections, Haryana, Election Geography.

Introduction

Political parties decide candidates for contesting elections based on their vote-catching abilities. Native place of the candidates is an important factor. Parties know that friends and neighbours voting matter in the polling system. The concept of friends and neighbours voting advocates more votes for a candidate in their place of residence or nearby areas. The

concept was identified first time in 1949 by V.O. Key in his study on localism in southern US politics. After that, it was analysed at various places in the world. Some important examples were Cutrish and Rossi (1958) in urban areas of the US, Lockard in New England, Reynolds (1969) in Georgia, Johnston (1972, 1973 & 1974) in New Zealand, Forrest and Johnston (1973), Tatalovich (1975) in Mississippi and Taylor & Johnston (1979). However, maximum relate to intra-party primary contests. The effect was also more effective in intra-party contests (Taylor and Johnston, 1979).

It is also a fact that the effect was not found in each election and at every place. A study on friends and neighbours voting in Victoria (Australia) in 1974 elections found that the effect was minor on voting as a few voters cast their vote in favour of local candidates (Johnston, 1978). On the other hand in the same decade in the 1977 elections, a study on friends and neighbours voting in the Galway West constituency found an effect on the elections (Parker, 1982). While the effect was tested in a geographically split legislature district in New York State in different seven elections; it was found more effective in voting as electors of the candidate's geographical part voted more in favour of the candidate (Kramer, 1990). To trace out the deeper layers of the effect Gorecki & Marsh tested the hypothesis using primary data. The findings reveal that geographic distance is a major factor between candidates and voters. Campaign contact also matters but it is important to take distance into account otherwise it may be over-estimated (Gorecki and Marsh, 2011).

Another study on the concept analysed the three different geographic levels. First, the home seat of the candidates denotes *local friends*. The second level is the adjacent constituencies as *neighbours* and the third one is the seat of the fellow MPs who gave the first preference to the candidate denoted as *political friends*. The study was on the UK's Labour Party intra-party elections of 1994 and 2010. The study suggested that candidates were benefitted at all the three levels. The candidates who had stronger local roots benefitted the most (Johnston et al., 2016). When the

question "Are voters mobilised by 'friends and neighbours' on the ballot?" was answered after the analysis of the 2014 state assembly elections in Massachusetts. The study suggests that the place of residence or place identity is important in voting decisions, county ties boost turnout or mobilise voters and the effect is greater in local contests than national or state-wide contests (Panagopoulos et al., 2017).

Database and Methodology

The research is based on secondary data and included the assembly elections of 2009, 2014, 2019 and 2024 in Haryana. The source of the data is the District Election Office, Hisar and Chief Electoral Office, Haryana. The offices provided the data in Form-20 (The Final Result Sheet by Election Commission of India) of elections which recorded the booth-wise polling in favour of different candidates or parties. The analysis is based on total Electronic Voting Machine (EVM) votes only as ballot votes were not counted booth-wise. Further, the booth level data was cumulated at the village level in the assembly. The candidates who secured five per cent & above of total valid votes in any of the elections were shortlisted for 'friends and neighbours' voting analysis. A total of 7 candidates were shortlisted; candidate “A” was contested all the four elections, “B” was contested in three elections, “G” was contested two elections and the remaining four (C,D,E,F) were contested single out of the four elections and all candidates denoted by the above codes not by their names. Further, the party affiliation of candidates helped in understanding the effect of party vote (Table 1 & 2).

The assembly is classified into different *geographical zones* for each candidate. The basis of the classification was the neighbouring village (known as *Gawaand,* locally) sharing the boundary with the native village of the candidate. The native village was considered the first geographical zone for the candidate. The villages sharing boundary with the native village was the next layer and so on. After that exercise, the two neighbouring layers (except the first native village zone) were merged into

one to eliminate the intersections and very thin zone structures. Thus different geographical zones were carved out for all candidates (Map 1, A to F).

Table 1

Narnaund Assembly Constituency: Candidates Selected from Political Parties for Analysis.

Candidate Code	2009	2014	2019	2024
A	BJP	BJP	BJP	BJP
B	INC	Independent	JJP	NC
C	INLD	NC	NC	NC
D	NC	INLD	NC	NC
E	NC	INC	NC	NC
F	NC	NC	INC	NC
G	NC	NC	INLD	INC

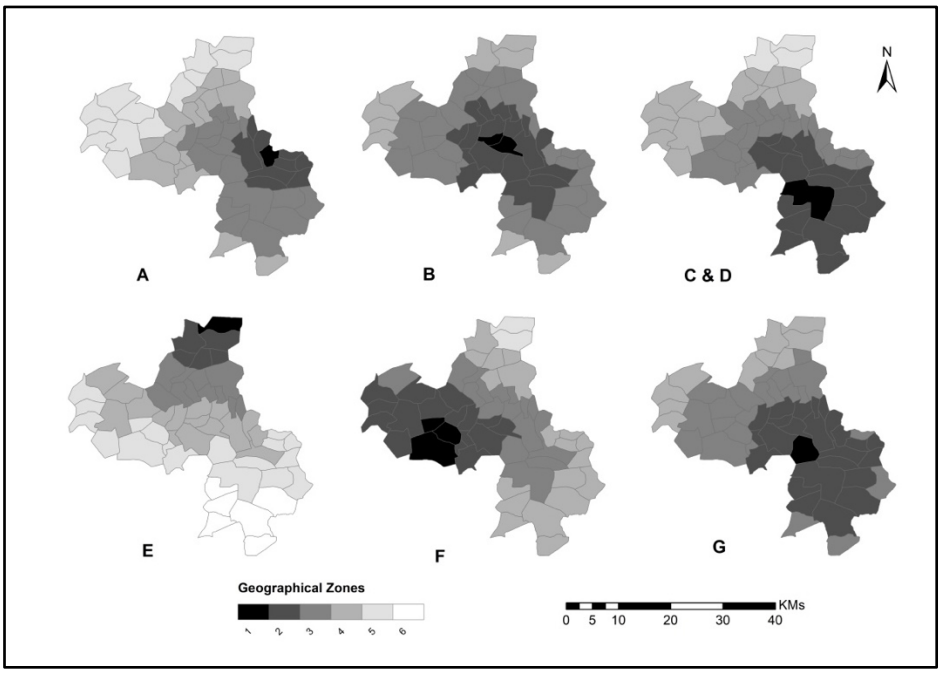
Note: Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP), Indian National Congress (INC), Indian National Lokdal (INLD) and Not Contested (NC)

Table 2

Narnaund Assembly Constituency: Native Villages of the Candidates and Number of Geographical Zones

Candidate (Code)	Native Village	Number of Zones
A	Khanda Kheri	5
B	Narnaund	4
C	Bass	5
D	Bass	5
E	Koth Kalan	6
F	Sisai	5
G	Petwar	4

Source: Compiled by the Author.



Map 1 Geographical Zones for candidates A to G

All geographical zones are denoted by numbers in increasing order and zone 1 is the native village of the candidate. The number of geographical zones ranged from 4 to 6 as the candidates' native villages were located at different locations in the assembly. Thus the rank of a geographical zone is an indicator of geographical distance from the native village. The simple regression was calculated to find out the cause-and-effect relationship between the friends and neighbours voting and geographical zones in the assembly. The rank of geographical zones was treated as the dependent variable and the vote share of the candidate in the respective geographical zone as the independent variable.

Friends and Neighbours Concept in this Study

One of the most common concepts in friends and neighbours analysis is distance decay. The concept is completely geographical. However, in the present study distance data is not used. So, it is replaced with the geographical zones as it represents distance indirectly. In this way the study is geographical and cultural in friends & neighbour analysis with the

local concept of *Gawaandi Bhai* and *Bhaichara;* a person from a neighbouring village is known as *Gawaandi bhai* and to support him or her is considered brotherhood or *bhaichara* in the area. Thus the concept also has a cultural dimension of friends and neighbors effect. The zone 1 is significant for *local boy effect*. The zone 2 is significant for the *gawaandi bhai & bhaichara effect* and further all zones were significant foe *distance decay effect*.

Results and Discussion

Candidate "A" was the candidate for Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) in all the four elections. It is found that he got the landslide support in his native village. His village Khanda Kheri is located at the eastern edge of the assembly. It shows the support for the local boy. Further, his support declined gradually in the next two zones. It shows the distance decay effect for the candidate. However, in the last two zones, his vote share was increased in the 2009 and 2014 elections. But in 2019 it was increased in the last zone and in 2024 it was marginally increased in fourth zone and again declined in the last zone. The more important fact is that the pattern of vote share for the candidate remained uniform in all the elections under study (Table 3).

Table 3

Narnaund Assembly Constituency: Geographical Zone-wise Percentage of Votes for Candidate "A".

Geographical Zones	Percentage of Votes by Year of Election			
	2009	**2014**	**2019**	**2024**
Native Village (Zone 1)	91.32	91.63	88.65	84.34
2	27.83	38.23	47.34	51.01
3	21.43	28.63	37.36	41.81
4	30.17	34.87	34.15	41.82
5	32.69	34.62	40.60	40.40

Source: Compiled by the scholar Form-20 (Final Result Sheet) by Election Commission of India for the Assembly Constituency.

For candidate “A”, in 2009 the model explains 58.3% of the variance in vote share (R^2 = 0.583) with a strong correlation (R = 0.763). The intercept, representing vote share in Zone 1 (the candidate's native village), is 91.3%. Moving to farther zones significantly reduces the vote share. Zones 2 to 5 have negative estimates compared to Zone 1: -61.2% to -58.5%, all statistically significant ($p < .001$). This suggests that geographical distance from the candidate’s area negatively impacts vote share. The strongest decline is in Zone 3 (-70.5%). The findings highlight the importance of proximity to the candidate in determining voter support (Table 4).

Table 4

Narnaund Assembly Constituency: Regression Analysis for Candidate “A” for Votes Received in 2009.

Part A				
Model	**R**		**R^2**	
1	0.763		0.583	
Part B				
Predictor	**Estimate**	**SE**	**t**	**p**
(Geographical Zones) Intercept [a]	91.3	8.75	10.44	< .001
2 – 1	-61.2	9.28	-6.6	< .001
3 – 1	-70.5	8.99	-7.85	< .001
4 – 1	-60.3	9.01	-6.69	< .001
5 – 1	-58.5	9.1	-6.42	< .001
[a] Represents level of reference				

Source: Computed by the Author.

In 2014 the model accounted for 52.6% of the variance in vote share (R^2 = 0.526) with a moderate-to-strong correlation (R = 0.725). The intercept, representing the vote share in Zone 1, is 91.6%. Compared to Zone 1, all farther zones show significant reductions in vote share: -51.5% (Zone 2), -62.4% (Zone 3), -56% (Zone 4), and -55.6% (Zone 5), with all p-values < .001. Zone 3 sees the largest decline in vote share, emphasizing the significant impact of geographical distance on electoral support. The findings indicate that voter proximity to the candidate positively influences voting outcomes (Table 5).

Table 5

Narnaund Assembly Constituency: Regression Analysis for Candidate "A" for Votes Received in 2014.

Part A				
Model	**R**		**R^2**	
1	0.725		0.526	
Part B				
Predictor	**Estimate**	**SE**	**t**	**p**
(Geographical Zones) Intercept [a]	91.6	8.54	10.73	< .001
2 – 1	-51.5	9.06	-5.68	< .001
3 – 1	-62.4	8.77	-7.11	< .001
4 – 1	-56	8.8	-6.36	< .001
5 – 1	-55.6	8.89	-6.25	< .001
[a] Represents level of reference				

Source: Computed by the Author.

In 2019 the model explains 42.9% of the variance in vote share (R^2 = 0.429) with a moderate correlation (R = 0.655). The intercept, representing vote share in Zone 1, is 88.6%. Moving to farther zones significantly reduces the vote share: -41% (Zone 2), -50% (Zone 3), -51.1% (Zone 4), and -45.8% (Zone 5), with all reductions statistically significant ($p < .001$). The largest decline occurs in Zone 4. These results emphasize that proximity to the candidate's area strongly correlates with voter support, although the model captures less variance compared to the previous (Table 6).

Table 6
Narnaund Assembly Constituency: Regression Analysis for Candidate "A" for Votes Received in 2019.

Part A				
Model	**R**	**R^2**		
1	0.655	0.429		
Part B				
Predictor	**Estimate**	**SE**	**t**	**p**
(Geographical Zones) Intercept [a]	88.6	8.85	10.02	< .001
2 – 1	-41	9.39	-4.36	< .001
3 – 1	-50	9.09	-5.5	< .001
4 – 1	-51.1	9.12	-5.6	< .001
5 – 1	-45.8	9.21	-4.97	< .001
[a] Represents level of reference				

Source: Computed by the Author.

In 2024 the model explains 25.5% of the variance in vote share (R^2 = 0.255) with a moderate correlation (R = 0.505). The intercept, representing vote share in Zone 1, is 84.3%. Moving to farther zones the vote share reduces: -33.9% (Zone 2), -42.6% (Zone 3), -41.4% (Zone 4), and -44.3% (Zone 5), with all reductions statistically significant ($p < .001$). The largest decline occurs in Zone 5. These results also repeat the pattern (Table 7).

Table 7

Narnaund Assembly Constituency: Regression Analysis for Candidate "A" for Votes Received in 2024.

Part A				
Model	**R**		**R^2**	
1	0.505		0.255	
Part B				
Predictor	**Estimate**	**SE**	**t**	**p**
(Geographical Zones) Intercept [a]	84.3	11.5	7.36	< .001
2 – 1	-33.9	12.2	-2.79	0.007
3 – 1	-42.6	11.8	-3.62	< .001
4 – 1	-41.4	11.8	-3.5	< .001
5 – 1	-44.3	11.9	-3.71	< .001
[a] Represents level of reference				

Source: Computed by the Author.

Candidate “B” is another candidate who contested all three elections. He contested on the symbol of the Indian National Congress (INC) in 2009, Independent in 2014 and Jan Nayak Janta Party (JJP) in 2019. He is from Narnaund located in the very center of the assembly. His support declined gradually through the geographical zones except in 3rd zone in 2019. Thus the data support the distance decay effect as well as *gawandi bhai* and *bhaichara* effect in all the elections for the candidate (Table 8).

Table 8

Narnaund Assembly Constituency: Geographical Zone-wise Percentage of Votes for Candidate “B”

Geographical Zones	Percentage of Votes by Year of Election		
	2009	**2014**	**2019**
Native Village (Zone 1)	52.87	53.22	56.96
2	30.55	26.54	48.27
3	26.61	18.59	44.61
4	27.31	14.91	52.63

Source: Compiled by the scholar Form-20 (Final Result Sheet) by Election Commission of India for the Assembly Constituency.

For Candidate “B”, in 2009 the model explains 14.4% of the variance in vote share ($R^2 = 0.144$) with a weak correlation ($R = 0.379$). The intercept, representing the vote share in Zone 1, is 52.9%. Compared to Zone 1, there is a reduction in vote share for farther zones: -20.6% (Zone 2, $p = 0.06$, not statistically significant), -25.2% (Zone 3, $p = 0.022$), and -27.5% (Zone 4, $p = 0.016$). The results show a decreasing trend in vote share with increasing distance from the candidate's native village, though the effect is weaker compared to other models, and the model's explanatory power is limited (Table 9).

In 2014 the model explained 26% of the variance in vote share ($R^2 = 0.26$) with a moderate correlation ($R = 0.51$). The intercept, representing the vote share in Zone 1, is 53.2%. Compared to Zone 1, there is a statistically significant reduction in vote share for farther zones: -26.8% for Zone 2 ($p = 0.021$), -34.5% for Zone 3 ($p = 0.003$), and -39% for Zone 4 ($p = 0.001$). The results indicate a clear decreasing trend in vote share with increasing distance from the native village of the candidate. This model demonstrates a stronger effect and better explanatory power compared to weaker models, with all reductions in vote share across zones being statistically significant (Table 10).

Table 9

Narnaund Assembly Constituency: Regression Analysis for Candidate "B" for Votes Received in 2009.

Part A				
Model	**R**		**R^2**	
1	0.379		0.144	
Part B				
Predictor	**Estimate**	**SE**	**t**	**p**
(Geographical Zones) Intercept [a]	52.9	10.4	5.07	< .001
2 – 1	-20.6	10.7	-1.93	0.06
3 – 1	-25.2	10.6	-2.36	0.022
4 – 1	-27.5	11	-2.5	0.016
[a] Represents level of reference				

Source: Computed by the Author.

Table 10

Narnaund Assembly Constituency: Regression Analysis for Candidate "B" for Votes Received in 2014.

Part A				
Model	**R**		**R^2**	
1	0.51		0.26	
Part B				
Predictor	**Estimate**	**SE**	**t**	**p**
(Geographical Zones) Intercept [a]	53.2	11	4.84	< .001
2 – 1	-26.8	11.3	-2.38	0.021
3 – 1	-34.5	11.2	-3.08	0.003
4 – 1	-39	11.6	-3.37	0.001
[a] Represents level of reference				

Source: Computed by the Author.

In 2019 the model explains only 4.7% of the variance in vote share (R^2 = 0.047) with a weak correlation (R = 0.217). The intercept, representing the vote share in Zone 1, is 56.96%, which is statistically significant (p < .001). Compared to Zone 1, the vote share decreases slightly in farther zones: -8.28% (Zone 2, p = 0.446), -11.39% (Zone 3, p = 0.293), and -6.69% (Zone 4, p = 0.549). However, none of these reductions are statistically significant (p > 0.05). The model indicates a weak relationship and provides limited explanatory power for the impact of geographical zones on vote share (Table 11).

Table 11

Narnaund Assembly Constituency: Regression Analysis for Candidate "B" for Votes Received in 2019.

Part A				
Model	**R**		**R^2**	
1	0.217		0.047	
Part B				
Predictor	**Estimate**	**SE**	**t**	**p**
(Geographical Zones) Intercept [a]	56.96	10.5	5.412	< .001
2 – 1	-8.28	10.8	-0.768	0.446
3 – 1	-11.39	10.7	-1.062	0.293
4 – 1	-6.69	11.1	-0.603	0.549
[a] Represents level of reference				

Source: Computed by the Author.

Candidate "C" and Candidate "D" were the candidates who contested on the symbol of Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) respectively in 2009 and 2014. The native village for both of the candidates was Bass. The village is located in the southern part of the assembly.

The support for Candidate "C" in 2009 declined gradually in the first three zones and reversely increased in the last two zones. The same pattern was repeated in 2014 for Candidate "D". However, Candidate "D" got less support in all zones in comparison to Mrs. Mor. The notable fact is that he secured much lesser vote in his native village. Even after that, the pattern

of support suggested distance decay effect in the first three zones and the highest support for the local contestants in the native village (Table 12).

Table 12

Narnaund Assembly Constituency: Geographical Zone-wise Percentage of Votes for Candidate "C" and Candidate "D"

Geographical Zones	Percentage of Votes by Year of Election	
	Candidate "C"	Candidate "D"
	2009	2014
Native Village (Zone 1)	74.89	51.59
2	36.63	30.77
3	30.16	25.15
4	37.26	32.89
5	35.73	33.67

Source: Compiled by the scholar Form-20 (Final Result Sheet) by Election Commission of India for the Assembly Constituency.

For Candidate "C", in 2009 the model explains 41.8% of the variance in vote share ($R^2 = 0.418$) with a moderate correlation ($R = 0.646$). The intercept, representing the vote share in Zone 1, is 72.7%, which is statistically significant ($p < .001$). Compared to Zone 1, vote share significantly decreases in farther zones: -35% (Zone 2), -41.4% (Zone 3), -35.7% (Zone 4), and -33.8% (Zone 5), all with p-values < .001. Zone 3 experiences the largest decline. These results indicate that geographical distance negatively affects vote share, with a notable drop as voters move away from the candidate's native village (Table 13).

Table 13

Narnaund Assembly Constituency: Regression Analysis for Candidate "C" for Votes Received in 2009.

Part A				
Model	**R**		**R^2**	
1	0.646		0.418	
Part B				
Predictor	**Estimate**	**SE**	**t**	**p**
(Geographical Zones) Intercept [a]	72.7	6.3	11.55	< .001
2 – 1	-35	7.09	-4.93	< .001
3 – 1	-41.4	6.93	-5.98	< .001
4 – 1	-35.7	7.14	-5	< .001
5 – 1	-33.8	9.62	-3.51	< .001
[a] Represents level of reference				

Source: Computed by the Author.

For candidate "D", in 2014 the model explains 23.6% of the variance in vote share (R^2 = 0.236) with a moderate correlation (R = 0.486). The intercept, representing the vote share in Zone 1, is 49.8%, which is statistically significant (p < .001). Compared to Zone 1, vote share significantly decreases in Zone 2 (-17.3%, p = 0.011), 3 (-24.3%, p < .001), and 4 (-17.1%, p = 0.013). However, the reduction in Zone 5 (-14.6%) is not statistically significant (p = 0.107). The largest decline occurs in Zone 3, indicating that geographical distance moderately impacts voter support, with mixed statistical significance (Table 14).

Table 14

Narnaund Assembly Constituency: Regression Analysis for Candidate "D" for Votes Received in 2014.

Part A		
Model	**R**	**R^2**
1	0.486	0.236

Part B				
Predictor	**Estimate**	**SE**	**t**	**p**
(Geographical Zones) Intercept [a]	49.8	5.82	8.56	< .001
2 – 1	-17.3	6.55	-2.64	0.011
3 – 1	-24.3	6.4	-3.79	< .001
4 – 1	-17.1	6.6	-2.59	0.013
5 – 1	-14.6	8.89	-1.64	0.107
[a] Represents level of reference				

Source: Computed by the Author.

Candidate "E" was a candidate for the Indian National Congress (INC) in 2014. His native village Koth Kalan is located at the northern boundary of the assembly. The zone-wise support suggests the distance decay effect for the candidate. The vote share of the candidate declined gradually in all six zones. The candidate also supported maximum in his native village.

Candidate "F" contested on the symbol of the Indian National Congress (INC) in 2019. His native village Sisai located in the western part of the assembly. The pattern of support for the candidate also suggests the distance decay effect in the first four geographical zones and again the maximum support came from the native village of the candidate. However, in the last zone, his vote share increased (Table 15).

Table 15

Narnaund Assembly Constituency: Geographical Zone-wise Percentage of Votes for Candidate "E" and Candidate "F"

Geographical Zones	Percentage of Votes by Year of Election	
	Candidate "E"	Candidate "F"
	2014	2019
Native Village (Zone 1)	42.41	53.10
2	8.98	3.37
3	8.02	2.60
4	5.17	1.69
5	5.57	2.61
6	4.79	NA

Source: Compiled by the scholar Form-20 (Final Result Sheet) by Election Commission of India for the Assembly Constituency.

For candidate "E", in 2014 the model explains 52.7% of the variance in vote share ($R^2 = 0.527$) with a strong correlation ($R = 0.726$). The intercept, representing the vote share in Zone 1, is 42.4%, which is statistically significant ($p < .001$). Moving to farther zones significantly reduces vote share: -31.6% (Zone 2), -32.2% (Zone 3), -36.3% (Zone 4), -36.5% (Zone 5), and -37.6% (Zone 6). All reductions are statistically significant ($p < .001$). The greatest decline occurs in Zone 6, highlighting the strong negative impact of geographical distance on voter support. The model indicates a clear relationship between proximity and vote share (Table 16).

Table 16

Narnaund Assembly Constituency: Regression Analysis for Candidate "E" for Votes Received in 2014.

Part A				
Model	**R**		**R^2**	
1	0.726		0.527	
Part B				
Predictor	**Estimate**	**SE**	**t**	**p**
(Geographical Zones) Intercept [a]	42.4	5.18	8.19	< .001
2 – 1	-31.6	5.67	-5.58	< .001
3 – 1	-32.2	5.43	-5.93	< .001
4 – 1	-36.3	5.36	-6.77	< .001
5 – 1	-36.5	5.31	-6.88	< .001
6 – 1	-37.6	5.59	-6.73	< .001
[a] Represents level of reference				

Source: Computed by the Author.

For candidate "F", in 2019 the model explains 86% of the variance in vote share ($R^2 = 0.86$) with a very strong correlation ($R = 0.927$). The intercept, representing the vote share in Zone 1, is 51.8%, and it is statistically significant ($p < .001$). Moving to farther zones significantly reduces the vote share: -47.6% (Zone 2), -48.9% (Zone 3), -50% (Zone 4), and -49.3% (Zone 5), all with p-values < .001. The reductions are consistent and substantial across all zones, indicating a strong negative impact of geographical distance on vote share. This model demonstrates a highly robust relationship between proximity and voter support (Table 17).

Table 17

Narnaund Assembly Constituency: Regression Analysis for Candidate "F" for Votes Received in 2019.

Part A				
Model	**R**		**R^2**	
1	0.927		0.86	
Part B				
Predictor	**Estimate**	**SE**	**t**	**p**
(Geographical Zones) Intercept [a]	51.8	2.76	18.8	< .001
2 – 1	-47.6	2.95	-16.2	< .001
3 – 1	-48.9	2.9	-16.9	< .001
4 – 1	-50	2.91	-17.2	< .001
5 – 1	-49.3	3.9	-12.6	< .001
[a] Represents level of reference				

Source: Computed by the Author.

Candidate "G" was contested first time in 2019 elections on the INLD symbol. In the next election of 2024 the candidate contested on the symbol of INC. His native village is Petwar. The village was located in the central part of the Narnaund constituency. The zone wise vote share of the candidate suggests that the highest votes for the contestant were found in his native village and declined in the very next zone. However the vote share of the candidate was increased in the third zone and marginally declined in the fourth or last zone. Thus the data suggests that the distance decay was not in uniform pattern for the candidate but the evidence of local boy support was existed in this case also (Table 18).

Thus the zone-wise data of vote share provide evidence of friends and neighbours effect on voting in the assembly. The effect was in all the four elections and for all the shortlisted contestants. However, the degree of effect is still subject to test. So, further, we test it through the regression analysis for all the candidates. It will help us to trace out the degree of correlation and cause and effect relationship between geographical zones and the vote share for candidates.

Table 18

Narnaund Assembly Constituency: Geographical Zone-wise Percentage of Votes for Candidate "G"

Geographical Zones G	Percentage of Votes by Year of Election	
	2019	2024
Native Village (Zone1)	32.92	80.63
2	1.83	44.94
3	1.80	55.44
4	1.90	52.85

Source: Compiled by the scholar Form-20 (Final Result Sheet) by Election Commission of India for the Assembly Constituency.

For candidate "G" in 2019 elections the variance was 79.7% in vote share and with a very strong correlation of (R=0.893). The vote share at intercept is 32.9% and it was reduced to 31% (Zone 2), -30.5% (Zone 3) and -30.7% (Zone 4). However, the total vote share was below five per cent in the election for the candidate. But the reduction was continuously significant and a very high relationship was found between distance (by zones) and vote share (Table 19).

While in 2024 election the vote share of the candidate was the highest in all the candidates were included in the study. The variance in the election was 22.9% with a moderate correlation of (R= 0.478). The vote share was

reduced -34.2% in (Zone 2), -25.1% in (Zone 3) and -27.5% in (Zone 4). Thus the reduction was recorded in all the zones for the candidate but it was highest in second zone. But it was decreased in the third and fourth zone (Table 20).

The analysis suggests that the vote share was decreased with the increasing geographical zone or distance from the native village; as regression analysis found statistically significant values for most of the candidates and elections under study. However, the values were not significant in the case of Candidate "B" in the 2009 and 2019 elections. Thus, the results vary for candidates as well as for the election years but the significant enough to explain the relationship between geographical zones and voting for the candidates.

Table 19

Narnaund Assembly Constituency: Regression Analysis for Candidate "G" for Votes Received in 2019.

Part A				
Model	**R**		**R^2**	
1	0.893		0.797	
Part B				
Predictor	**Estimate**	**SE**	**t**	**p**
(Geographical Zones) Intercept [a]	32.9	2.15	15.3	< .001
2 – 1	-31	2.2	-14.1	< .001
3 – 2	-30.5	2.21	-13.8	< .001
4 – 3	-30.7	2.26	-13.6	< .001
[a] Represents level of reference				

Source: Computed by the Author.

Table 20

Narnaund Assembly Constituency: Regression Analysis for Candidate "G" for Votes Received in 2024.

Part A				
Model	**R**		**R²**	
1	0.478		0.229	
Part B				
Predictor	**Estimate**	**SE**	**t**	**p**
(Geographical Zones) Intercept [a]	80.6	11	7.34	< .001
2 – 1	-34.2	11.2	-3.05	0.004
3 – 2	-25.1	11.3	-2.23	0.031
4 – 3	-27.5	11.5	-2.39	0.021
[a] Represents level of reference				

Source: Computed by the Author.

Conclusions

The friends and neighbours voting analysis in the Narnaund assembly constituency show that the vote share of candidates decreased gradually in the geographical zones. It is uniformly true at least for the first three geographical zones for all the seven contestants in all the elections under study.

Candidate "A" contested all four elections with the same party. His degree of correlation is increased election by election and the regression model is significant to explain the effect of geographical zones on voting. Candidate "B" contested three elections but with different parties. His

degree of the correlation was the highest when he contested independently in 2014. However, the regression model found a causal effect on voting patterns. The patterns suggest that party vote share may cause variation in support for the candidate in geographical zones or villages. Candidate "C" and Candidate "D" contested the election from the same party but the degree of correlation was different for both the candidates. The casual effect was stronger for Candidate "C" than Candidate "D". However, both are husband-wife and belong to the same geographical zones. It may be the gender or temporal conditions responsible for the variations. Candidate "E" and Candidate "F" both contested on the symbol of INC in 2014 and 2019 respectively. Both the candidates were new players in the assembly and found the most significant effect of geographical zones on voting.

The patterns strongly supported the concept of the friends and neighbours effect in the assembly. It was also known as support for *Gawaandi bhai or bhaichara* in the Narnaund assembly constituency of the state as the second zone of all candidates provided more support than the third zone except for candidate "G" in 2024 election. The possible reason behind the fact is overlapping of second zone with the candidate "A". The concept has its cultural roots as it was considered socially immoral to support an outsider over a candidate of his village or from a neighbouring village. Sometimes *panchayats* (groups of elder villagers) also intervened for the support of a local candidate irrespective of caste, class, religion and party. The findings of the research supported the concept of *the Local Boy Effect* as all seven candidates got the maximum support from their native village.

Thus it can be concluded that the *Gawaandi Bhai and Bhaichara effect* and *the Local Boy effect* existed in the assembly. The primary findings also support the *distance decay effect* in the assembly. Thus the effects are geographical as well as cultural in nature. But even after that, the cause of the effect could not be explained by any single factor or a specific group of factors. It is a result of the milieu of socio-political and geographical factors in the Narnaund assembly constituency.

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Panjab University Research Journal (Arts)
VOL. LVI 145-164 (July-December 2025) *ISSN: 0970-5260*

Rights-Based Policy Implementation in India: A Policy Overview

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Abstract

India has been witnessing a shift from welfare-based approach to rights-based policy approach. This article examines the impact of India's shift from welfare models to rights-based policies. The objective of this paper is to evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of four key legislative frameworks- Right to Information Act, 2005, Right to Education Act, 2009, National Food Security Act, 2013 and Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005. The methodology is based on qualitative analysis and relies on secondary data analysis. Despite the existence of enforcement mechanisms for promoting and protecting the rights of citizens, many beneficiaries, specifically from marginalised communities, lack awareness of their entitlements and the processes available to address violations. Social discrimination, corruption and procedural complexities usually result in the dilution of policy outcomes. However, realising the full capacity of this approach demands institutional reforms, community participation, institutional accountability, sustained political commitment, social audits and technological innovation.

Keywords: Right-Based Policy, Poverty, Social Protection, Policy Implementation, Marginalised Groups

Introduction

The rights-based policies in the Indian union mark a significant transition from the discretionary welfare to an entitlement-based polity, emphasised by the constitutional mandate and participatory development values. This approach reframes the role of the state from a provider to an enabler,

underpinning legal forcibility, administrative responsibility, and the empowerment of subaltern communities. (Grewal & Singh, 2011; Drèze & Khera, 2017). The execution of rights-based policies in India shows a complex journey toward tackling poverty, social justice and inequality. Over the years, the government has enacted vital legislation guaranteeing rights to employment, education, information, and food. Rights-based policies like Right to Information Act, 2005, Right to Education Act, 2009, National Food Security Act, 2013 and Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 systematise socio-economic rights and try to embed social justice within the core of public administration (Pani & Iyer, 2012). The translation of normative rights into concrete outcomes is negotiated by institutional potential, inter-governmental coordination, policy integration and the performance of frontline bureaucrats (Makinde,2005). Despite a progressive legislative framework, implementation remains laden with challenges, Including bureaucratic inefficiencies, dispersed service delivery, insufficient financial and human resources, and inconsistent political promises at various levels of government (Khan,2016). These structural and procedural hurdles mainly result in policy derailment and unequal access to entitlements. The judiciary has played a significant role in expanding the scope of socio-economic rights through public interest litigation and innovative constitutional interpretation, blending the boundaries between directive principles of state policy and justiciable rights (Pillay,2014). Judicial activism has helped to offset bureaucratic inertia and political indifference, especially in cases involving vulnerable populations. However, concerns about judicial activism and institutional capacity to adjudicate complex policy issues remain relevant (Mathew, 1996).

Objectives and Methodology of the Study

This study aims to examine the impact of rights-based policy implementation in India critically. It focuses on how the shift from traditional welfare models to legally enforceable entitlements has

influenced governance practices and socio-economic outcomes. Specifically, the research evaluates the implementation and effectiveness of four key legislative frameworks: RTI, RTE, MGNREGA, and NFSA.

The methodology adopted for this research is qualitative, relying on secondary data analysis. It involves a review of existing academic literature, government reports, policy documents, and publications by civil society organisations. The analytical framework is grounded in public administration theory, with a focus on institutional capacity, policy implementation dynamics, intergovernmental coordination, and accountability mechanisms.

Conceptualizing the Rights-Based Policy Approach

For centuries, governance has grappled with the fundamental relationship between the state and its citizens. From absolute monarchies to representative democracies, the underlying principles guiding state action have varied, often oscillating between the pursuit of the collective good and the protection of individual liberties. In recent decades, a powerful paradigm has emerged that seeks to fundamentally reorient this relationship: the rights-based policy approach, which advocates the principles of universality and indivisibility, participation and inclusion, accountability and rule of law, non-discrimination and equality and empowerment. This approach posits that individuals are not merely recipients of state largesse or passive subjects of its authority, but rather active rights-holders with legitimate claims on the state and other duty-bearers. It represents a significant shift from a focus on charity or welfare provision to one rooted in legal and moral entitlements (Sen, 1999).

The conceptual roots of the rights-based approach can be traced back to the Enlightenment era, with philosophers like John Locke articulating the concept of natural rights inherent to all individuals. However, the modern articulation of human rights gained significant momentum in the aftermath of World War II, culminating in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948. The state is the primary duty-bearer, obligated to

respect, protect, and fulfil human rights. However, other actors, including non-state entities and individuals, can also have responsibilities (UNDP, 2006). This clarifies lines of accountability and provides a framework for seeking redress when rights are violated. A rights-based approach actively involves and empowers rights-holders in the policy process. It emphasises participation, access to information, and mechanisms for voice and redress (Pogge, 2008). This moves beyond a top-down, prescriptive approach to one that acknowledges the agency and dignity of individuals.

Constitutional Foundations and Judicial Enactment of Rights-Based Policies

The Indian Constitution provides a strong foundation for the development and implementation of rights-based policies by embedding both Fundamental Rights and the Directive Principles of State Policy. Fundamental rights, including equality before the law, freedom of speech, and the right to life and liberty, are enforceable through judicial mechanisms, thereby ensuring their protection. While the Directive Principles are not justiciable, they offer normative guidance for promoting social and economic justice, the obligation to construct an equitable welfare system and prevent the excessive concentration of wealth. The inclusion of socialism in the Preamble highlights the state's commitment to a just social order, and Article 12 delineates the scope of the ‘State’, enabling judicial scrutiny of public authorities.

Judicial review functions as a constitutional safeguard, empowering the judiciary to strike down laws and executive actions that contravene constitutional provisions. The Supreme Court, as the apex interpreter of the Constitution, plays a pivotal role in ensuring that all state organs operate within constitutional boundaries, thereby upholding civil liberties and reinforcing the rule of law. The Court’s expansive interpretation of Article 21- guaranteeing the right to life and personal liberty-has been instrumental in broadening the scope of socio-economic rights.

Since the late 1970s, the Supreme Court has emerged as a significant actor

in shaping India's rights-based policy framework through judicial activism. It has employed rights not only as enforceable legal entitlements but also as structuring and normative principles to evaluate state actions in areas such as economic liberalisation, privatisation, and development. This approach has led to an "asymmetrical rights terrain," wherein certain rights, particularly those of marginalised groups, are subordinated to state and market imperatives (Mate, 2016). In the case of legislated social rights, such as the MGNREGA and the NFSA, interventions have been both facilitative and supervisory, generating complex inter-institutional dynamics between the judiciary and the legislature (Mukherjee, 2020). Judicial engagement has increasingly blurred the line between civil-political and socio-economic rights, enhancing state accountability and transparency while fostering new political mobilisations around welfare entitlements (Ruparelia,2013a). While the Court has occasionally functioned as a "progressive juristocracy," advancing redistributive justice and social rights, its jurisprudence has also selectively endorsed state policies that entrench inequality or suffer from weak implementation.

Public Interest Litigation (PIL), a hallmark of this judicial activism, has helped improve access to justice for marginalised communities and pressured the executive to fulfil rights-based commitments related to food security, education, and shelter. Thus, while judicial activism has generated long-term symbolic and institutional gains, its effectiveness in enforcing rights on the ground reflects the broader complexities of rights-based governance in an unequal and evolving democracy.

Analysis & Discussion

Right-Based Policy Landscape in India

The Rights based policy in India changing from the old welfare ridden governance to legally implementable rights. Important legislations like RTI, RTE, MGNREGA and NFSA aim at giving power to citizens, specifically the marginalised section of the society.

The Right to Information Act, 2005: A Paradigm Shift in Democratic Governance

The Right to Information Act, 2005 portray a milestone in India's popular governance exhibiting paradigm shift from culture of secrecy to transparency and accountability. It was enacted to give power to citizens fostering transparency in the working of governmental institution and checking corruption. It has activated the article 19(1)(a) constitution of India which gives right to freedom of speech and expression (Relly et. al., 2020). The Act authorizes timely response to seeker requests for government related information and data, thereby reimplementing participatory governance and empowering informed citizens discourse (Acharya&Mahanti,2024). The RTI Act is structurally strong, authorizing the appointment of Public Information Officers (PIOs) in government authority and establishing an appellate framework, encompassing the Central and State Information Commissions. These institutions are empowered to enforce compliance and Adjudicate disputes arising from the denial or delay of information.

Theoretically, The RTI is rights based approach to progress by systemizing citizen entitlements and increasing country's accountability mechanism. Conceptually, despite its capacity, execution challenges continue, often undermining the Act. A significant impediment remains the poor public awareness, specifically among rural and secluded populations who stand to avail benefit maximum from openness in service delivery and governance (Meenu, 2016 & Goyal, 2023). The challenge of application procedures, entangled with digital divides, bureaucratic opacity and language barriers, stops access to information for major segments of the citizens. Moreover, denials and delays of information plea are widespread, often from understaffed PIO offices, administrative inertia, and inadvertently evasion by public authorities (Relly et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the Lack of a sustained training infrastructure for public personnel, the growing misuse of the Act, backlogs in the procedure of

appeals by Information Commissions, and the lack of legislative safeguards for whistle-blowers have all contributed to the ineffectiveness of the RTI. Another component of concern is the bureaucratic resistance and politics to transparency. While the RTI Act supports to democratize information, it has been encountered with passive resistance from administrative structure that sees transparency as an intimidation to discretionary authority. This is peculiarly visible in the discretionary and selective disclosure practices seen across departments and offices, where information is usually keep under vague or misapplied exemptions included in Section 8 of the Act (Acharya & Mahanti, 2024). In addition, bureaucratic reluctance is intensified by poor political will to encourage RTI institutions, as evidenced by delayed appointments, inadequate budgetary allocations, and vacancies in Information Commissions.

The horrifying effect of attacks and threats faced by RTI activists further limits the full realization of the Act's aim. Several activists have faced threats, harassment, and some time fatal violence for asking information which exposes corruption or misgovernance, showing the anxious interference between citizen and the state when the transparency challenges rooted power structure.

Civil society organizations have not only contributed to public awareness and capacity-building but also acted as a watchdogs to monitor implementation and push for institutional reforms (Relly et al., 2020). It is imperative to undertake comprehensive public awareness campaigns, institutionalize systematic record management, and ensure rigorous adherence to mandatory disclosures. The integration of information and communication technologies (ICT) into RTI processes, simplification of fee payment methods, regular capacity-building initiatives for implementing authorities, and the enactment of a comprehensive whistle-blower protection law are also essential for enhancing transparency, accountability, and citizen empowerment (Ghuman, al., 2017).

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009: Legalizing Educational Entitlements

The RTE Act, 2009, represents a landmark shift in India's policy landscape by placing the responsibility of elementary education within a rights-based legal framework. Enacted in alignment with Article 21-A of the Constitution, introduced through the 86th Constitutional Amendment Act of 2002, the RTE Act came into force on April 1, 2010. It guarantees every child between the ages of 6 and 14 the right to full-time elementary education of satisfactory and equitable quality in a formal school that meets specified norms and standards (Ministry of Education, 2025). The Act's emphasis on “free” and “compulsory” education is significant. “Free” education ensures that no child, except those in private unaided institutions, shall bear financial costs that impede their access to schooling. “Compulsory” education imposes a legal obligation on both central and state governments, as well as local authorities, to ensure admission, regular attendance, and completion of elementary education. In doing so, the RTE Act transitions the discourse on education from welfare-oriented service delivery to enforceable rights, thereby holding the State accountable for educational provision (Ministry of Education, 2025).

Despite this progressive legal foundation, the implementation of the RTE Act has been marred by significant shortcomings. Key deficiencies include inadequate infrastructure, an insufficient number of trained teachers, and a persistent lack of financial investment and political will (Tripathy & Bhuyan, 2021). Many government schools continue to function without basic facilities such as clean drinking water, functional toilets, libraries, and playground elements crucial for a child-friendly and inclusive learning environment.

One of the most regressive developments in the post-implementation period has been the gradual erosion of key provisions of the RTE Act, often without careful empirical evaluation. For instance, several state governments reinstated board or centralized examinations for Classes III,

V, and VIII, undermining the Act's original vision of age-appropriate, non-threatening pedagogy. The reversal of the no-detention policy despite limited evidence linking it to declining learning outcomes reflects a troubling retreat from a child-centric educational philosophy toward a performance-driven and exclusionarymodel. These policy reversals contradict the foundational principles of the Act, which aimed to make schooling a stress-free and inclusive experience (Dhaka & Thapar, 2020).

The State's failure to fulfil the RTE mandate has drawn sharp criticism from various quarters. The absence of strong monitoring mechanisms, a light approach to planning, and limited potential-building efforts have all undermined the Act (Rai, 2014). Moreover, significant disparities in execution continue across regions and socio-economic cohorts, specifically affecting marginalised communities such as the Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes, Muslims, and girls. The decentralised governance framework, while providing power to local bodies, has not always translated into accountable, responsible or impactful educational delivery due to inconsistency in capacity and coordination.

Additionally, civil society organisations have played a vital role in conducting awareness campaigns, filing Public Interest Litigations (PILs), monitoring implementation and mobilising public participation in seeking educational entitlements (Rai, 2014). Yet, much remains to be done. A rights-based approach to the demands of education more than legal entitlements, requires an organized improvement of curriculum design, teacher training, the allocation of resources, and institutional accountability. Sustained public investment, strong political will, and effective complaint redressal mechanisms are crucial for bridging the implementation gap. Moreover, equity must remain main in the educational agenda. Without systematic measures to tackle intergenerational disadvantage and exclusion, the RTE Act risks becoming a formal guarantee lacking substantive transformation.

In the broader context of India's development aspirations, the effective

implementation of the RTE Act is not merely a legal commitments but a foundational step toward building an inclusive, just, and knowledge-based community. As India aspires to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically SDG 4 on quality education, it must revitalise its commitment to the principle safeguarded in the RTE Act. Ensuring that every child obtains quality education is not merely a constitutional commitment but a moral duty that strengthens the nation's democratic and developmental ethos.

MGNREGA as a Social Security Scheme

The MGNREGA was formulated in 2005, is a significant social welfare initiative designed to strengthen livelihood security in India's rural areas. By offering a legal guarantee of 100 days of wage employment each financial year to every rural household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work, the Act made a paradigmatic shift in dealing with rural development and poverty alleviation. MGNREGA, the world's largest public works-based social security program, reflects India's pledge to inclusive development and employment-based rights. One of MGNREGA's vital strengths lies in its capacity to construct economic security for rural households.

Studies have shown that the scheme has effectively influenced consumption patterns, food security and income stability among beneficiaries. The provision of guaranteed work near to home has assisted in reducing rural-urban migration and fortified the rural economy through enhanced purchasing power. The program has also added to rural infrastructure development by facilitating the construction of assets such as water conservation structures, roads and land development-related works that serve agricultural productivity and sustainability.

According to a study conducted by the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) in 2011, MGNREGA has had a positive impact on rural households' welfare, including their income and livelihoods. The study found that MGNREGA has increased rural

households' income by 13.5% on average and reduced poverty by 5.5%. Another study conducted by the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Delhi in 2019 found that MGNREGA has had a positive impact on agricultural productivity, which is a key source of income for rural households. The study found that MGNREGA works related to water conservation and land development have increased agricultural productivity by 6.2% and 4.8%, respectively (Suraj, et al., 2023).

An important dimension of MGNREGA's execution is its contribution to gender empowerment. With a legal requirement that at least one-third of the beneficiaries should be women, the scheme has created employment options for rural women who were traditionally not included in wage labour markets. Involvement in MGNREGA has led to increased autonomy, decision-making power among women, financial independence and thereby challenging embedded patriarchal norms.

However, the execution of MGNREGA has not been without problems. Governance incapacity, lack of awareness among beneficiaries, delayed wage payments, corruption, and poor planning have limited its impact in some regions. The state potential varies widely, leading to notable disparities in execution across states. Technology-based amendments such as Aadhaar-based attendance, DBTs, and location markers of assets have been introduced to strengthen transparency and accountability, but concerns about digital divides and exclusion errors persist. To maximise the effectiveness of MGNREGA, greater attention must be given to strengthening institutional mechanisms, improving administrative capacity, and ensuring timely wage payment. Proactive disclosure, community participation and decentralised planning are vital to making the program more reactive to local needs. Furthermore, connecting MGNREGA with other rural development initiatives could support more sustainable and holistic rural transformation.

NFSA, 2013, the world's largest Food Security Programme

The NFSA, enacted in 2013, represents a transformative shift in India's

approach to food security- from a discretionary welfare scheme to a rights-based legal entitlement. By making food a legal right for approximately two-thirds of the population, the Act aims to ensure access to adequate quantities of quality food at affordable prices, thereby addressing chronic hunger and malnutrition (Sandhu, 2014 & Puri, 2022). Under the NFSA, the government provides subsidised foodgrains-rice at ₹3/kg, wheat at ₹2/kg, and coarse grains at₹1/kg. The National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013 covers up to 75% of the rural and 50% of the urban population with subsidized foodgrains, based on 2011 Census data, which amounted to a maximum of 81.35 crore people. As of October 31, 2024, around 80.67 crore people are covered under the act. The Act classifies beneficiaries into two categories: Priority Households (PHH) and Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) households. PHH families receive 5 kg of food grains per person per month, whereas AAY households receive 35kg per month, regardless of the number of members (NFSA,2025).

The legislation incorporates progressive features aimed at empowering women and ensuring accountability. For instance, the eldest woman in a household (aged 18 or above) is recognised as the head for issuing ration cards. Institutional mechanisms such as State Food Commissions, District Grievance Redressal Officers (DGROs), and Vigilance Committees have been established to address complaints and promote transparency. Furthermore, the law mandates proactive disclosure of information related to Public Distribution System (PDS) operations, contributing to improved governance and citizen awareness (NFSA, 2025).

One of the prime achievements of NFSA has been the amplified utilization of the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS). The Act has added to enhanced access to subsidised food, specifically among the weak populations, including women and children. It also encompasses provisions for child nutrition and maternity benefits, specifically through programs such as the Mid-Day Meal Scheme and Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) (Puri, 2022). Technological improvements

have further enhanced the execution of NFSA. States have increasingly accepted tools such as biometric authentication, Aadhaar seeding, and Fair Price Shop (FPS) automation to lessen leakages and enhance efficiency. Digital interventions like mobile tracking of food grain distribution and e-POS machines have helped enhance transparency and accountability (Hazarika & Oberoi, 2024). These steps are in alignment with broader trends in governance transformation and offer replicable models to the developing nations facing food insecurity issues.

Despite its capacity, NFSA has encountered several problems. A key critique is its cereal-centric approach, which notably ignores the dietary diversity important to address malnutrition comprehensively. While it affirms calorie sufficiency, it does not sufficiently respond to the challenge of micronutrient deficiency or "hidden hunger". (Varadharajanet al., 2014). Moreover, beneficiary verification continues to pose important issues. Since the Act leans on outdated Census data, many eligible households may be excluded, while inclusion errors remain prevalent. Administrative incapacity, logistical delays in food grain delivery and corruption further compromise the Act’s effectiveness in certain regions (Sandhu,2014).

Concerns have also been raised about the financial sustainability of NFSA, although studies estimate that the incremental cost is relatively modest, around 0.2% of the GDP (Varadharajan et al., 2014). Nevertheless, efficient fund utilisation and regular audits remain essential to maintaining public trust and program viability.

In essence, the NFSA, 2013, has played a pivotal role in institutionalising food security as a justiciable right in India. Its rights-based approach, wide coverage and integration with existing social safety nets mark significant progress in addressing hunger and food insecurity. However, for NFSA to realise its full potential, further policy refinement, technological integration, and inclusive beneficiary targeting are essential. Continued investment in nutritional diversity, real-time monitoring systems, and

community participation will help ensure that the Act evolves in response to India's dynamic food security landscape.

Impact Assessment: Rights-Based Policy Implementation in India

The implementation of rights-based policies in India has brought about a significant transformation in the landscape of social welfare and state-citizen engagement. These policies have sought to reframe entitlements such as food, education, employment, and information access as legal rights, thereby shifting the development discourse from a welfare-centric to a rights-centric framework. The impacts of this shift are various, touching upon economic inclusion, social equity, political empowerment, and institutional accountability.

One of the deepest effects has been the expansion of economic avenues, mainly for the marginalized and the population of rural identity. The employment guarantee scheme has a long-lasting effect on diminishing income insecurity and distress migration, while encouraging community asset creation and local development. Likewise, the right to education has expanded access to schooling, particularly for disadvantaged cohorts such as Dalits, girls and tribal communities, thereby strengthening their social capacity and long-term human development capability. Politically, the rights-based paradigm has strengthened the agency of the public by creating formal mechanisms to make the state accountable. Legislation that assures transparency and access to public information has enabled people to ask for their entitlements, challenge bureaucratic ambiguity, and participate more actively in governance processes. This has led to expanded civic participation and expanded awareness of constitutional rights among previously excluded groups.

Additionally, rights-based legislation has systematised grievance redressal mechanisms, aiming to make the state more responsive and transparent. This shift has contributed to the democratisation of development, forcing public institutions to work with greater legitimacy and citizen involvement.

However, the effectiveness of these policies has been irregular and heavily shaped by the quality of implementation. Gaps in administrative potential political will and interdepartmental coordination usually result in the dilution of policy outcomes. In many cases, ambitious legislation is not matched by institutional readiness or sufficient resources, which undermines the potential benefits. Quality assurance in service delivery remains a major concern. While legal claims ensure coverage, they do not always assure the quality of education, employment offered or food. The priority on reaching numerical targets may voluntarily side-line qualitative dimensions such as nutrition standards, learning outcomes, or sustainable livelihoods. Widespread corruption in rights-based policy implementation sabotages the process by diverting funds from essential services, such as healthcare and education, and eroding the legitimacy of state institutions. It can directly violate rights through actions like bribing a judge, leading to impunity and lack of access to justice.

Furthermore, despite provisions for inclusion, many marginalized groups still fight to access their rights due to social discrimination, low awareness and procedural complexities. Notwithstanding the progressive objective of rights-based policies, grievance redressal mechanisms and legal provisions for execution often remain weak and underutilised. Many beneficiaries, specifically from marginalised communities, lack awareness of their entitlements and the processes available to address violations. State and district-level grievance redressal groups are frequently under-resourced, inadequately staffed, or absent altogether, leading to retarded or futile resolution of complaints. Moreover, legal recourse mechanisms are often unreachable due to a lack of legal or bureaucratic hurdles. This undermines the reliability of rights-based frameworks and diminishes public trust in state institutions. fortifying institutional accountability through transparent, robust, and people-centric grievance redressal systems is crucial for ensuring that rights are not just ambitious but actionable and enforceable.

Rights-based policy implementation in India has led to significant gains in inclusion, empowerment, and access to essential services. However, realising the full capacity of this approach needs more than legal claims; it demands institutional reforms, community participation, institutional accountability, sustained political commitment, social audits and technological innovation to make sure that claims are not only promised but meaningfully reached. A key suggestion raising from the analysis is the requirement to fortify the role of social movements and civil society in the enforcement and monitoring of rights-based policies. These actors have historically played a crucial role in deciding and promoting rights discourse in India, and their continued involvement is essential for making sure that policies do not remain symbolic but transform into tangible outcomes. As India increasingly accepts technological tools like Aadhaar, DBT and mobile apps in welfare delivery, civic engagement mechanisms must be strengthened to safeguard against misuse and exclusion. Broadening participatory governance, transparency, and accountability frameworks will make sure that the rights-based approach meets its transformative potential, particularly for the most marginalised populations.

Conclusion

The execution of rights-based policies in India symbolises a paradigm transition in the country’s approach to social welfare, from discretionary state benevolence to enforceable legal claims. These policies have substantially contributed to broadening access to basic services, enhancing transparency and empowering marginalised communities and accountability in governance. By strengthening citizens' rights to education, food, information and employment, the state has made important progress towards social justice and institutional potential. Public awareness across regions and political commitment have led to irregular outcomes. While rights-based frameworks have institutionalised the voice and agency of the vulnerable group, quality and productivity in service

delivery remain critical concerns. To confirm that rights convert into real and lasting change, building awareness among beneficiaries, institutional accountability, social audits, investing in functional administrative mechanisms and integrating technology for enhanced transparency and outreach are important. Ultimately, the effectiveness of rights-based policy execution in India hinges on bridging the gap between legislative goals and on-ground realities, affirming that every citizen not only has paper claims but can apply them meaningfully in their life.

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Panjab University Research Journal (Arts)
VOL. LVI 165-188 (July-December 2025) *ISSN: 0970-5260*

Women's Perception on Environmental Changes in District Kinnaur, Himachal Pradesh, India

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Abstract

Hydroelectric power projects in Himachal Pradesh India have played a pivotal role in advancing the region's economic development. However, this advancement has also led to substantial environmental and socio-cultural impacts, particularly in tribal areas like Kinnaur, which possesses significant hydropower potential. The expansion of both large- and small-scale hydropower projects in Kinnaur has profoundly influenced the livelihoods of the local population. This study highlights the necessity of incorporating women's perspectives into discussions on the environmental and social consequences of hydropower development. Women in Kinnaur, who depend heavily on natural resources, communal property systems, kinship ties, and social networks, experience the effects of these projects in ways that differ from those of men. Given their prominent roles in agriculture and horticulture, which are essential to sustaining household livelihoods, women are particularly susceptible to environmental changes caused by such developments. The study explores women's perceptions of the environmental transformations resulting from hydropower projects in Kinnaur, focusing on their lived experiences and contributions to their communities. As an exploratory study, a survey was conducted using a carefully designed interview schedule to explore respondents' perceptions of the hydroelectric power projects' effects in the area. A total of 120 women were interviewed, with 30 women from each of the four villages surrounding the hydroelectric power projects. Examining hydropower expansion through the lens of women's experiences reveals significant insights into its

varied and far-reaching effects on environmental sustainability, social dynamics, and community livelihoods.

Keywords: *Hydroelectric power projects, environmental effects, women's perception*, *Livelihood and agriculture, socio- economic effects.*

Introduction

India, like many countries, faces a significant demand for energy, and hydropower is considered a crucial solution to meet this demand. Himachal Pradesh, recognized as a "Power State," has vast potential for electricity generation, particularly through hydropower. The state is under pressure to produce clean energy using advanced, eco-friendly technologies. With the Himalayas offering considerable hydropower opportunities, the construction of run-of-the-river (ROR) projects and large water storage dams along river basins has increased in recent years. However, these large-scale hydropower projects often have severe environmental, ecological, and social consequences, especially for local communities whose livelihoods depend on the land and forests. Despite these impacts, numerous hydropower projects continue to be approved and developed annually, largely driven by the need for clean energy (Lata & Shashni, 2021).

The hydropower potential of Himachal Pradesh is estimated at 27,436 MW, with 24,000 MW considered feasible for exploitation. The state already operates several hydropower plants, and there are plans for further expansion in the future. These projects are often justified on the grounds of fostering economic development and progress in the state. However, the extraction of resources from the Himalayan region through methods like drilling and blasting has significant effects on the environment and local communities. Over 30 hydropower projects, ranging from small to large-scale, have been proposed in the Kinnaur district along the Sutlej river basin. Most of these projects are ROR projects on the Sutlej and its tributaries (Kumar & Katoch, 2016). The environmental and ecological disturbances caused by these projects, including landslides and deforestation, are considerable. These issues reflect global concerns

regarding the social and environmental impacts of large dam projects (Khagram, 2004). A significant criticism in India has been the lack of genuine public involvement in the dam development process, particularly for communities directly impacted by these projects (Diduck et al., 2007).

Tribal communities, such as the people of Kinnaur, have long been closely connected to the land, forests, and natural resources, which form the foundation of their livelihoods. The Kinnaur tribe, for example, relies on forest resources for building homes and for heating and cooking during the winter months. The disruption of these resources due to hydropower development could further worsen the challenges faced by the Kinnaur people, who have traditionally been stewards of the environment. The region is also increasingly prone to landslides, which have caused the loss of fertile land and infrastructure, further threatening the livelihoods of local communities. Over the past decade, the Kinnaur community has experienced several devastating landslides. This study, therefore, examines the impact of large-scale hydropower projects in the Kinnaur district of Himachal Pradesh, an ecologically sensitive region that is increasingly threatened by extensive construction activities related to hydroelectric power generation

Women and Environment

In 1991, the World Bank emphasized the vital role that women play in managing natural resources such as soil, water, forests, and energy, highlighting their deep understanding of the environment (World Bank, 1991). Research indicates that women's unique relationship with nature, including their traditional knowledge of natural resources and the medicinal uses of forest products, makes them key players in fostering conservation and sustainability. However, as deforestation intensifies, this generational knowledge is increasingly under threat. Women, especially those living in forested and tribal regions of India are often the most affected by environmental degradation, as many depend on forests for both their livelihoods and household needs. Around two to three million people in these areas rely on firewood collection, with women doing 90% of this labor

(Agarwal, 1992). Forest product collection has traditionally provided women with additional income, nutrition, and medicinal resources, but they often face exploitation from intermediaries and profiteers within these largely informal economies (Agarwal, 1992).

Environmental degradation disproportionately impacts women due to their close relationship with nature, especially in their roles as caregivers and community managers. They often bear the brunt of the effects of environmental harm, inadequate infrastructure, and limited resources. In India, women have historically been at the forefront of conservation efforts, offering valuable insights into environmental issues based on their lived experiences. For economically disadvantaged women, the need for environmental preservation is closely linked to their struggle for survival, showing the compatibility between ecological sustainability and economic resilience (Shiva, 1988). Women globally play a central role in the stewardship of resources, whether it is safeguarding water sources or protecting forests (Boserup, 1970). The connection between women and the environment began to gain significant attention in the 1970s, particularly with Ester Boserup's influential work, *Woman's Role in Economic Development*. By the 1980s, policymakers started recognizing women's crucial contributions to environmental and resource management, incorporating gender perspectives into policy frameworks (Boserup, 1970).

This research paper, therefore, seeks to examine women's perception on the environmental impacts of hydroelectric power projects in the Kinnaur District of Himachal Pradesh, India.

Theoretical perspective

Eco-feminism

Eco-feminism presents a significant theoretical framework that connects the oppression of women with environmental degradation, emphasizing that both are deeply influenced by patriarchal structures. It argues that environmental challenges cannot be fully understood without considering gender dynamics, as the exploitation of nature and the subjugation of

women are intertwined. Eco-feminism critiques the patriarchal ideologies that associate masculinity with power and control, while femininity is linked to nature, nurturing, and passivity. This theory advocates for dismantling these gendered hierarchies in order to achieve both gender equality and environmental sustainability. A key example of eco-feminism in action is the Chipko movement, which emerged in the 1970s in the Himalayan region of India in response to deforestation. This movement highlights the intersection of environmental and gender-based struggles, positioning women as central figures in environmental activism. Vandana Shiva connects the Chipko movement to earlier forest satyagrahas, emphasizing how both movements addressed cultural responses to forest destruction. These movements demonstrate how environmental harm disproportionately affects women, especially in rural areas where they rely on natural resources for their livelihood. From an eco-feminist perspective, large-scale development projects, such as hydroelectric power plants, exacerbate the vulnerabilities of women. These projects often lead to deforestation and displacement, with women bearing the worst of the negative consequences. Women are frequently marginalized in these processes, with their concerns largely ignored in decision-making. Compensation is typically directed to male household heads, leaving women without benefits and reinforcing gender inequality. Furthermore, women's greater reliance on communal resources such as land, water, and forests makes them more vulnerable when these resources are disrupted. Eco-feminism highlights the need for a comprehensive approach to environmental justice, one that addresses both gender inequality and environmental preservation. By focusing on the shared experiences of women and nature, eco-feminism advocates for more inclusive policies and practices that empower women and protect the environment.

Literature Review

Labaris (2009) provided a case study of women's involvement in environmental management in Nasarawa State. Primary data was generated from a questionnaire survey of women from five local government areas.

The majorities of the women were involved in farming and have significantly contributed to land and soil conservation. Seventy percent have planted trees or flowers in the last five years, while seventy nine percent have indicated clearing their surroundings daily. Problems faced by the women include a lack of waste disposal equipment, poor drainage systems, and a lack of awareness among the general public. Appropriate recommendations were proffered to enhance women's involvement. Women should be allowed to participate at the local, regional, national, and international levels on environmental issues and should be present in equal numbers to men. Additionally, more women should be involved in decision-making about policies, programs, or funding for the environment.

Drew (2014) explored the role of women in opposing dam projects, focusing on their motivations for taking action and how well their concerns about environmental and development issues are addressed. The study calls for greater attention to gender perspectives and more critical thinking in social movement campaigns and decision-making, suggesting that this is essential for fostering gender-inclusive sustainable development. Women's resistance to unfair development practices, particularly in mountainous areas, manifests through various forms of participation, one of which is their engagement in social movements.

Clement et al. (2019) explore gendered hierarchies embedded within the hydropower sector in Northeast India using a feminist political ecology approach. They reveal that hydropower development is dominated by institutional masculinities organizational norms and practices that systematically exclude women from leadership, decision-making, and technical roles. The study also documents how women's local knowledge and water management practices are often overlooked, despite their central role in community water use. Furthermore, displacement caused by hydropower projects disproportionately affects women, exacerbating vulnerabilities through loss of land, livelihoods, and social networks. The authors argue for a reimagining of water governance that is gender-transformative and responsive to social justice concerns.

Sahu (2019) conducted a critical examination of the role of women in the Kashipur movement. Following India's independence, the country adopted a modernization approach to development, which primarily benefitted the middle and elite classes. In response to this injustice, numerous movements have emerged since the 1970s to challenge mainstream development models and displacement. In 1993, the Odisha state government partnered with multinational corporations for mining projects that would displace over eighty villages in the Kashipur block of Rayagada district. Tribal women in Kashipur strongly opposed these projects, organizing rallies and taking on responsibilities such as raising funds and managing finances for the movement. The Kashipur movement became one of India's prominent women-led environmental campaigns, opposing development models that were detrimental to the poor, tribal communities, and women. The movement championed freedom from external interference, exploitation, and oppression, advocating for the rights and autonomy of local communities. It also criticized the unfair treatment of tribal populations and demanded equal rights, citizenship, and the fair application of laws to protect tribal and tribal women's rights. The study suggests that women's organizations must collaborate and mobilize collective campaigns to better protect the rights of women from various backgrounds, particularly those from scheduled tribes.

Parameswaran (2022) traces the evolution of women's environmental activism in India from the post-independence period through the 1970s to the late 1980s, when eco-feminism emerged as a key framework for understanding and addressing environmental issues worldwide. Indian feminists adapted this model to examine local ecological concerns, while also critiquing its tendency to overlook social and economic inequalities. By the 1990s, economic liberalization in India dampened the momentum of women's environmental activism, and public discussions on ecological justice became scarce. Today, there is a pressing need for an ecological perspective that prioritizes social justice, essentially advocating for a revival of the environmentalism of the poor as a necessary alternative in a world that is increasingly unsustainable and uninhabitable.

Gopalakrishna et al. (2024) provide a comprehensive analysis of environmental projects in India that succeed in aligning conservation objectives with human well-being. Their research, which spans forests, water bodies, and biodiversity corridors, demonstrates that projects integrating equity goals such as gender parity, inclusive participation, and fair resource access yield stronger ecological outcomes. The study showcases initiatives where women's involvement in monitoring, restoration, and biodiversity management significantly enhanced both social and environmental resilience. The authors caution against "fortress conservation" models and advocate for frameworks that promote co-management, livelihood security, and community stewardship.

Mallya and Hans (2024) delve into India's environmental challenges through an ecofeminist lens, articulating how patriarchal structures not only marginalize women but also drive ecological destruction. They argue that ecofeminism is particularly pertinent to the Indian context, where women especially from rural and indigenous communities maintain a deeply symbiotic relationship with the natural environment. The study examines case studies of women's grassroots environmental activism, including their leadership in movements such as the Chipko and Narmada Bachao Andolan. The authors emphasize the need for inclusive environmental governance that not only acknowledges women's traditional ecological knowledge but also incorporates their leadership in policy-making and implementation. They conclude that gender justice and environmental sustainability are inextricably linked, and environmental policies must actively dismantle gender hierarchies to be truly effective.

Objective of the study

The objective of this study is to explore women's perception on the environmental consequences of hydroelectric power projects in Kinnaur district, Himachal Pradesh.

Study area Description

The study was conducted in Kinnaur, previously known as Chinni tehsil in

Mahasu District, Himachal Pradesh. Located 235 kilometers from Shimla, the state capital, Kinnaur is characterized by its mountainous terrain, deep valleys, diverse flora and fauna, and unique tribal culture. It is classified as a Scheduled Tribe area under the 5th Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The indigenous people of Kinnaur are known as the 'Kinnaura' or 'Kinnara' tribe, and the entire district is considered a Scheduled Tribe (ST) region (Verma, 2002). The Satluj River is the main watercourse in the region, along with several tributaries such as Sorang khad, Wangar khad, Ropa khad, Tidong khad, and Baspa khad. The Satluj River drains most of the district and is known for its significant potential for hydroelectric power generation. Most hydroelectric projects in the area are Run-of-River (ROR) projects located in the Sutlej River basin and its tributaries. The region hosts numerous small- and medium-sized hydroelectric plants, some of which are operational while others are still under development (Balokhra, 2015). Due to the large concentration of hydroelectric projects in the area and after extensive field visits, Kinnaur district was selected for this study.

Methodology

This study was conducted in the villages near four major hydroelectric power projects in the Kinnaur district in Himachal Pradesh India. This study examines the perceptions of environmental changes among women in Kinnaur district, Himachal Pradesh, where communities are intricately linked with natural resources. Given their significant dependence on agriculture, forest products, and grasslands, women's insights are crucial for understanding the impacts of environmental shifts. By focusing on women's experiences and observations, this research aims to contribute to a nuanced understanding of local environmental changes in Kinnaur district.

The study uses both qualitative and quantitative methods to focus on women's perceptions of the environmental impacts of these projects in the region. Primary data was collected for the study, which was specifically carried out in Kinnaur district. As an exploratory study, a survey was conducted using a carefully designed interview schedule to explore respondents' perceptions of the hydroelectric power projects' effects in the

area. The interview schedule was pre-tested to ensure the questions were clear, accurate, and flexible, with some open-ended questions included. A total of 120 women were interviewed, with 30 women from each of the four villages surrounding the hydroelectric projects. The interviews included women from various age groups and socio-economic backgrounds to provide a well-rounded perspective. Additionally, women from different local organizations, such as Mahila Mandals (women's groups) and village panchayats (local councils), were interviewed. In some instances, groups of two to three women were interviewed together to gather collective information about hydropower development and related activities in the region.

Results and Discussion

Socio- economic profile:

The demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of individuals within a specific group or population play a significant role in shaping their perspectives and opinions on various issues. Therefore, conducting an examination of these characteristics is essential. In this context, relevant parameters such as age, caste, marital status, family structure, education, and occupation are considered. Since the study is focused on a tribal area, the entire population is rural. To align with the objectives of the research, only women were interviewed.

Table 1
Socio- economic profile of the Respondents

Characteristics	Categories	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Age	30-40	46	38.3
	40-50	38	31.7
	50-60	26	21.7
	60-70	10	8.3
Caste	Upper caste	82	68.3
	Lower caste	38	31.7

Marital status	Married	90	75
	Unmarried	22	18.3
	Widowed	8	6.7
Family type	Joint family	56	46.7
	Nuclear family	64	53.3
Education	Illiterate	8	6.7
	Up to primary(5^{th})	20	16.7
	Middle (8^{th})	26	21.7
	Matriculation(10^{th})	32	26.7
	Plus two(12^{th})	22	18.3
	Graduation	10	8.3
	Post Graduation	2	1.7
Occupation	Government job	12	10
	Private job	8	6.7
	MGNREGA	72	60
	Govt. schemes	6	5
	Village council	22	18.3

As seen in Table 1, the largest proportion of female respondents (38.3%) were in the 30-40 age group, followed by 31.7% in the 40-50 range, and 21.7% in the 50-60 age group. A smaller percentage, 8.3%, fell into the 60-70 age groups. In terms of caste, 68.3% of the respondents belonged to upper-caste groups, specifically the "Rajputs and Kannets" of Kinnaur, while 31.7% were from lower-caste groups, including the Scheduled Castes, which are further divided into sub-categories. Regarding marital status, 75% of the women were married, 18.3% were unmarried, and 6.7% were widowed. In terms of family structure, 46.7% of the women lived in joint families, while 53.3% resided in nuclear families. Although the difference was minimal, it suggests a shift in family dynamics, with the possibility of more nuclear families emerging in the future. Educationally, the majority of the respondents were educated, with only 6.7% being illiterate, indicating a

relatively high level of education among women in the area. Despite their education, however, most women were not engaged in skilled employment. A significant 60% of the respondents were involved in the MGNREGA program for their livelihood, pointing to the limited employment opportunities for women in Kinnaur.

Women's Perception on Environmental changes in Kinnaur:

The Himalayan district of Kinnaur in Himachal Pradesh has undergone notable environmental changes in recent years. These include a rise in hydropower infrastructure, large-scale deforestation, retreating glaciers, irregular rainfall patterns, and a shift in traditional farming systems. In rural and tribal settings like Kinnaur, women who often oversee the collection and use of natural resources and care for families are typically the first to observe and react to such environmental disturbances. Their understanding, shaped by daily engagement with forests, water sources, and agricultural lands, provides critical, context-specific insights into ecological shifts. Unfortunately, these insights are frequently overlooked in mainstream environmental discussions and policy-making processes.

This environmental awareness stems from a deep, lived knowledge rather than formal scientific training. Vandana Shiva describes how women in rural and indigenous communities function as guardians of ecological diversity and promote sustainable practices. Shiva introduces the concept of "ecological feminism," which describes a way of relating to the environment that prioritizes harmony, mutual support, and balance (Shiva, 1988). In Kinnaur, this ecological worldview is evident in women's support for organic agriculture, their resistance to poorly regulated hydropower projects, and their efforts to mobilize communities against displacement and land encroachment. Similar trends can be observed throughout India. Environmental degradation tends to disproportionately affect women, particularly those in underprivileged communities. Giving women a voice in environmental planning is especially urgent in fragile ecosystems like the Himalayas, which are particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Women's practical knowledge and firsthand experience offer early

indicators of environmental stress and culturally appropriate adaptation strategies that might not emerge from top-down approaches. Their perspectives also critique dominant, technocratic, and male-centric models of environmental governance by offering alternative values rooted in care, equity, and sustainability. In Kinnaur, there is a growing recognition of women's contributions through local initiatives such as self-help groups, community cooperatives, and support from non-governmental organizations. These platforms not only affirm the importance of women's environmental knowledge but also enhance their capacity to influence change. Acknowledging and integrating women's perspectives on environmental issues is a crucial step toward building climate resilience and ecological justice not just in Kinnaur, but throughout India.

Hence, an initiative was taken to understand how women in Kinnaur perceive the ongoing environmental changes**.** As primary users and caretakers of natural resources, their daily experiences with land, water, and forests position them to notice even subtle shifts in the environment. By capturing their perspectives, this effort aims to highlight the gendered dimensions of environmental change and ensure that women's voices inform more inclusive and sustainable ecological planning.

Table 2
Women's perception on Environmental Changes in Kinnaur

Categories	Measuring scale	No. of Respondents	Mean Score value (%)
Increased Landslide	To a large extent	76	76
	To a considerable extent	28	22.4
	To some extent	16	9.6
	To a limited extent	0	0
	Not at all	0	0
Loss of forest (Pines gerardiana & cedrus	To a large extent	72	72
	To a considerable extent	24	19.2
	To some extent	14	8.4
	To a limited extent	10	4

deodara)	Not at all	0	0
Increased Water pollution	To a large extent	56	56
	To a considerable extent	34	27.2
	To some extent	18	10.8
	To a limited extent	12	4.8
	Not at all	0	0
Increased Air Pollution	To a large extent	67	67
	To a considerable extent	29	23.2
	To some extent	18	10.8
	To a limited extent	6	2.4
	Not at all	0	0
Increased Noise Pollution	To a large extent	65	65
	To a considerable extent	25	20
	To some extent	18	10.8
	To a limited extent	12	4.8
	Not at all	0	0
Decrease Rainfall	To a large extent	51	51
	To a considerable extent	32	25.6
	To some extent	24	14.4
	To a limited extent	13	5.2
	Not at all	0	0
Decrease Snowfall	To a large extent	53	53
	To a considerable extent	33	26.4
	To some extent	21	12.6
	To a limited extent	13	5.2
	Not at all	0	0
Increased Soil erosion	To a large extent	64	64
	To a considerable extent	32	25.6
	To some extent	16	9.6
	To a limited extent	8	3.2
	Not at all	0	0
Reduced Flow of river/khad	To a large extent	59	59
	To a considerable extent	44	35.2
	To some extent	11	6.6

	To a limited extent	6	2.4
	Not at all	0	0
Less Discharge of natural springs	To a large extent	79	79
	To a considerable extent	30	24
	To some extent	11	6.6
	To a limited extent	0	0
	Not at all	0	0
Loss of Agriculture and horticulture produce	To a large extent	86	86
	To a considerable extent	24	19.2
	To some extent	10	6
	To a limited extent	0	0
	Not at all	0	0
Increased Incidences of natural calamities	To a large extent	62	62
	To a considerable extent	28	22.4
	To some extent	22	13.2
	To a limited extent	8	3.2
	Not at all	0	0

To assess the respondents' views on environmental changes, five statements were presented for them to evaluate how much they perceive such changes in their area. The respondents were asked to rate the statements on a scale ranging from "to a large extent" to "not at all." A score of 5 was assigned to "to a large extent," 4 to "to a considerable extent," 3 to "to some extent," 2 to "to a limited extent," and 1 to "not at all." The mean score for each statement was calculated, and an overall mean score was derived.

As shown in Table 2, the issue of landslides was universally acknowledged by all female respondents across Kinnaur. They reported that landslides were infrequent in the region before the establishment of hydroelectric power projects, but their frequency has increased significantly since the projects' introduction. A majority of 76 percent of respondents confirmed that landslide occurrences have risen following the installation of these projects. Landslides in Kinnaur are primarily found in areas with weak rock formations or zones disturbed by activities such as mining and

road construction. These events are influenced by a combination of factors including topography, slope, land use, geological structure, and lithology. The resulting landslides have caused considerable damage, including loss of life and property, road damage and closures, the depletion of natural water resources like springs, and numerous other challenges for local communities. Kinnaur, a highly ecologically sensitive region in Himachal Pradesh, is further endangered by the ongoing construction of hydroelectric power projects. The frequent landslides are also threatening the region's apple orchards and local habitats. Research indicates that the risk of landslides escalates with tunneling in mountainous areas due to the large amounts of water that infiltrate the ground. This finding aligns with the research by Lata and Shashni (2021), which suggests that the use of explosives for blasting through both surface and underground sections of the project destabilizes existing slopes and disrupts the fragile geological structure, thereby contributing to the occurrence of landslides.

72 percent of those surveyed acknowledged the issue of deforestation in the region. They reported that the construction of hydroelectric power projects has led to the clearing of large areas of agricultural and forest land, resulting in the removal of numerous trees, including the critically endangered chilgoza pine and cedrus deodar species. The chilgoza pine is valued for its edible seeds, which are rich in carbohydrates, proteins, and other medicinal properties. It plays a vital role in the livelihoods of local communities due to the high market value of pine nuts. On the other hand, the cedrus deodar is prized for its strength, resistance to decay, and fine, dense grain, making it an excellent building material. The local tribal populations rely heavily on these limited land and forest resources for sustenance, as well as for meeting their daily needs. This reliance on communal lands, such as classified forest areas, is crucial for their livelihoods. Furthermore, forests hold significant socio-cultural and spiritual value for the region's indigenous communities. Additionally, 56 percent of the respondents observed an increase in water pollution since the development of hydroelectric projects in their area. They claimed that the operators of these projects dispose of

waste materials into the river, which contributes to the pollution of the water. 67 percent of respondents reported experiencing air pollution in the study area. A considerable amount of air pollution arises from various activities involved in the construction of tunnels, barrages, roads, and other operations such as excavation, drilling, blasting, loading, and material transportation. The primary source of dust is the drilling, blasting, excavation, crushing, and transportation processes. A significant amount of dust is also carried by the wind from overloaded dumps. The dust generated by these construction activities has an immediate negative impact on the local population. It also harms vegetation, as the dust settles on plant leaves, blocking photosynthesis and thereby affecting plant health. During the operational phase, there is an increase in vehicle traffic, which is a major contributor to air pollution. Locals reported that the constant movement of vehicles on the project site generates substantial amounts of dust, polluting the surrounding air. This air pollution has caused damage to apple orchards and agricultural crops, leading to a decline in the quality of produce and negatively impacting the local economy. Additionally, the air pollution has had detrimental effects on the health of the residents.

65 percent of the respondents reported an increase in noise pollution since the construction of hydroelectric power projects in their area. They mentioned that their region was once peaceful, with minimal vehicle traffic, but after the construction began, large vehicles have been continuously moving day and night. Additionally, heavy machinery produces significant noise throughout the area. Sounds from blasting and drilling operations are constant, contributing to the noise levels. The noise comes from activities such as constructing the barrage, operating the powerhouse, using tunnel boring machines, running pumps, operating drilling machines, and moving dumpers. Prolonged exposure to such high noise levels can lead to irritation, fatigue, temporary hearing threshold shifts, and even permanent hearing damage. The noise levels remain high during the operational phase due to ongoing machinery noise and traffic. Locals reported that the constant noise has significantly impaired their hearing ability.

51 percent of respondents have observed changes in the climate and noted a decrease in rainfall in the area. They attributed these changes to the excessive use of technology and specifically blamed the construction of hydroelectric power projects. Fifty-three percent of women also reported a reduction in snowfall in their region. They recalled that winters were once marked by abundant snow, and this ensured a steady water supply during the summer months. However, with the decrease in snowfall, Kinnaur now faces water shortages. The climate in Kinnaur was once favorable, with regular snow and rainfall, but after the onset of development activities, the climate has significantly changed. Most respondents have noted a drop in snowfall and a rise in temperatures. They expressed concern that if the construction of hydropower projects continues in their area, it will lead to severe water shortages in the future. 64 percent of women reported experiencing soil erosion in their area, particularly near the reservoir site. The local community believes that the extent of soil erosion has worsened due to the blasting activities carried out during the project's construction. Additionally, respondents indicated that the soil's ability to retain water has diminished compared to previous years as a result of the project's implementation. 59 percent of respondents observed a reduction in the flow of rivers and streams (khads) after the construction of the hydroelectric power projects in their region. They explained that the water from these rivers and streams is now being diverted for the hydropower project, leading to a significant decrease in water flow in both the rivers and the khads. 79 percent of respondents reported a noticeable decline in the flow of natural springs, which are vital for their agriculture and daily household tasks. The construction of hydroelectric power projects has had a significant impact on these crucial water sources. Many women noted that numerous natural springs have dried up due to extensive blasting during the project's construction. The loss of these springs has been felt by nearly every villager. Water scarcity caused by the drying up of springs has been a direct consequence of the development of the project, and most respondents have experienced varying degrees of this issue. The majority of respondents

linked the drying of springs to the diversion of surface water into deeper subterranean levels as a result of tunneling activities, with water shortages becoming noticeable after tunneling began. This disturbance to water sources during tunnel excavation, especially due to blasting, is believed to be the main cause. Locals are concerned that these hydropower projects are threatening their primary and most reliable sources of water for drinking, domestic use, and agriculture.

86 percent of the female respondents reported a decline in agricultural and horticultural yields following the construction of the hydroelectric power project in their area. Kinnaur's economy is primarily based on commercial horticulture, especially apple orchards, and seasonal cash crops like peas, potatoes, and rajma. Additionally, dry fruits such as almonds, apricots, walnuts, and chilgoza pine nuts are key sources of income. However, the construction work for the hydroelectric projects has negatively impacted both agriculture and horticulture to varying extents. The region's biological environment has been damaged by the construction activities, with dust pollution from the site and the constant movement of heavy vehicles and machinery severely affecting the surrounding areas. This dust pollution has notably reduced the quality and quantity of food produced. Respondents also mentioned a reduction in rainfall around the dam areas, which further harms crop production. They hold the hydropower project authorities responsible for the environmental changes, citing that the increased air pollution and decreased precipitation due to the construction activities have contributed to the decline in agricultural and horticultural yields in the region.

One respondent stated, "*Agriculture and horticulture are vital sources of income in Kinnaur. The region's climate only permits six months of agricultural activity during the summer, with limited rainfall, so farming depends heavily on canal irrigation. Large-scale development projects take up vast areas of agricultural and horticultural land, disrupting natural irrigation systems and forcing people to change their occupations. As a result of these so-called development efforts, an independent farmer, once*

proud of their work, is now reduced to becoming a laborer under schemes like MGNREGA."

62 percent of the respondents reported an increase in the frequency of natural disasters in the area. They noted that such events were once rare, but now, the continuous blasting and drilling for tunnel construction have intensified the occurrence of natural calamities.

Discussion

Local women in Kinnaur have noted that the delicate ecological balance sustaining their agriculture, livestock, and forest-based livelihoods is increasingly being disrupted. The once predictable seasonal rhythms have given way to unpredictable weather long periods of drought punctuated by sudden, intense rainfall resulting in soil degradation and declining crop yields, particularly of staple crops like peas and barley. Additionally, they report the depletion of forest resources that are vital for gathering firewood, fodder, and traditional medicines. These shifts not only threaten their economic survival but also place greater physical and emotional stress on them, as they must now travel further and work longer to access the resources they need. Across many rural parts of the country, women have been at the forefront of environmental resistance movements. The Chipko movement in Uttarakhand is a notable example of such grassroots activism. These movements question development models centered on exploitation rather than ecological balance. In Kinnaur, women's increasing recognition of the damaging effects of hydropower projects from vanishing water sources and increased landslides to the erosion of cultural traditions highlights a grassroots resistance to environmentally and socially harmful development. Their activism is deeply intertwined with the defense of their heritage and the well-being of future generations.

It is evident that the large-scale development of hydroelectric power projects in the Sutlej River basin and its tributaries poses a serious threat to the lives and livelihoods of local communities. These projects have caused irreversible damage to the ecology and environment of Kinnaur, a region

that is geographically vulnerable. The residents of Kinnaur are deeply concerned about the environmental sustainability of their area, citing issues such as the disappearance of springs, changes in land use, loss of biodiversity, and the flooding of land and forests due to the expansion of hydroelectric projects in the region. In Kinnaur, women share a special connection with nature and the environment. They are particularly sensitive to environmental issues, given their integral role in agriculture and horticulture. Women perform the majority of tasks related to farming, and their perspectives are crucial when considering the impacts of hydroelectric projects. They depend more on common property resources, social ties, and kinship than men, and they play a vital role in supporting their households' livelihoods. In the study area, women are more involved in agriculture and horticulture than men, and they also took part in the protest movements during field visits. Many local festivals and fairs in Kinnaur center on environmental and natural themes, reflecting the community's deep connection to the land. Women in Kinnaur often sing songs that emphasize their bond with nature, honoring the mountains, springs, lakes, and greenery in their daily lives. One of the biggest challenges posed by the growth of hydroelectric projects in the region is the diversion of land along the river basins, most of which is classified as forest. The land and forests are not only essential for the tribal people's livelihood but also have a profound influence on their culture. Women traditionally gather food, fuel, and fodder from these forests and used to graze their animals there as well. Because of their close relationship with nature, women in Kinnaur are particularly attuned to the environmental damage caused by these development projects.

Conclusion

Based on the findings and observations from the study, it is clear that women and the environment are deeply interconnected. In Kinnaur, women are particularly dependent on the environment to meet their domestic needs. They have long played a vital role in environmental conservation and are well-equipped to contribute meaningfully to managing family and

community resources. Women in Kinnaur have traditionally been central to fulfilling household and community energy needs, and due to their close connection to nature, they are often more sensitive to environmental changes. The construction of hydroelectric power projects has had a significant impact on the Kinnaur population in Himachal Pradesh. While these projects contribute to energy production and increase the nation's per capita energy availability, they have also had negative effects on local communities. Many women in Kinnaur have reported noticeable environmental changes following the expansion of hydroelectric power projects. The majority of women in the study area stated that the region has experienced severe environmental consequences, including ongoing landslides. The uncontrolled blasting during construction has destabilized the slopes, leading to the creation of new landslides while exacerbating existing ones. Large-scale development activities have caused substantial loss of life and livelihoods in the region. As primary users of local resources, it is crucial to involve women in environmental planning and conservation efforts. Their perspectives are essential in the development and implementation of any environmental initiatives. It is important that women's voices are included in the decision-making processes for development projects. Their insights can significantly contribute to the protection of the environment. Furthermore, it is vital to address the rights of indigenous people and place women at the center of development initiatives, ensuring they play an active role in shaping the future of their communities.

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Panjab University Research Journal (Arts)
VOL. LVI 189-211 (July-December 2025) *ISSN: 0970-5260*

Exploring Centralization or Decentralization as Strategies in Response to Covid-19 Management: A Case Of India

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Abstract

COVID-19 struck our lives, livelihoods, and nations in an unprecedented manner. The magnitude of such an event brought about seismic shifts in governance architecture. During this period of turbulence, one of the significant debates that emerged was the correct and optimal approach to managing, rehabilitating, and recovering from COVID-19. One side of the debate highlights the importance of centralization as a strategy by showing its effectiveness in timely health directives, taking prompt and fast decisions, timely procurement of vaccines, and rolling out timely need-based social sector programs. On the flip side, the need for area- and context-specific strategy, better service delivery, and better community mobilization and participation make the strategy of decentralization imperative. Given India's vast diversity in political, economic, geographic, and social spheres, deciding to deduce one particular strategy, settle on one side of the debate, or find the best way will be irrational at best. This paper found that using a combination of both approaches, with an exemplary distribution of responsibilities, is the most effective way forward in combating such shocks, as demonstrated through case studies and interviews.

Keywords: COVID-19, Centralization, Decentralization, Context-Specific, Community mobilisation

Introduction

Researchers from various fields have investigated whether centralized or decentralized (or federal) political regimes managed the COVID-19

pandemic better. Some claim that centralized systems can respond quickly, prevent local rivalry for resources, act in the national interest, and prevent a fragmented reaction (Kumar, 2020). Some cite China as an example of how a centralized system might enable a coordinated and successful response (Zhong et al., 2022) alongside South Korea and Japan. Others contend that decentralized or federal systems, like those in Canada or Germany, provided a more adaptable response that allowed regional governments to capitalize on their unique local assets and address localized issues (Greer et al., 2022). Many have concluded that there is no simple solution and that, in reality, a blend of central and local approaches that utilises a country's institutional capabilities works best (Janssen & van der Voort, 2020). The balance between centralization and decentralization has been a point of discussion regarding the management of COVID-19 in India. On the one hand, the national government has been instrumental in providing state and local governments with direction, resources, and funding. For instance, the central government imposed a statewide lockdown in March 2020 to halt the spread of the virus (Pulla, 2020), and it subsequently introduced various programs, including the PM CARES Fund, to bolster the nation's healthcare system. On the other side, several parts of COVID-19 management have also embraced the decentralized strategy. Since they have a better grasp of the situation on the ground and the demands of the local population, state administrations have been primarily responsible for adopting guidelines and enforcing limitations. Numerous states have also established COVID-19 task forces and implemented strategies like increased testing, contact tracing, and vaccine programs (Biswas, 2020). However, there has been debate over how to strike a balance between centralization and decentralization, especially after the second wave of the pandemic. The federal government's decision to permit significant gatherings, such as religious festivals and political demonstrations, has drawn criticism for being a factor in the rise in instances. Additionally, there have been questions about the accessibility

and fair distribution of resources like oxygen and vaccines, which some claim might have been better managed using a centralized strategy.

The given paper aims to examine and study the important strategies employed in COVID-19 containment in India, including centralization and decentralization strategies, to assess the effectiveness of these strategies and to deduce the best context-specific strategies for crisis management. To achieve these objectives, primary data were collected from stakeholders involved in various initiatives implemented in response to the pandemic to understand their perceptions of the effectiveness of the employed strategies. Further, based on the case studies and the primary data, a prescriptive study was done to answer the debate regarding the right strategy between centralization and decentralization, which can even be beneficial in a future crisis.

About COVID-19

COVID-19, short for Coronavirus Disease 2019, is a highly contagious respiratory disease that originated in the city of Wuhan, China. It is caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). According to the WHO, COVID-19 is a contagious illness caused by the SARS-CoV-2 novel coronavirus. When an infected person coughs, sneezes, speaks, or exhales, respiratory droplets are the primary way in which the virus is transmitted. Additionally, touching infected surfaces before contacting the face, mouth, or eyes might transmit it. The virus can result in serious respiratory infection and create a wide variety of symptoms, from mild to severe, and in the worst case, even be fatal (Ciotti et al., 2020).

India and COVID-19

Like the rest of the world, India was experiencing the epidemic. Each country affected by the COVID-19 pandemic utilised a distinct set of legislative tools at its disposal to address the extraordinary issue. India has utilised both the Epidemic Diseases Act of 1897 and the Disaster Management Act of 2005 as its primary legal tools to contain the spread of the virus. India thus designated the outbreak as a "notified disaster"

(Explained: How Will Declaring COVID-19 a "Notified Disaster" Help Tackle the Situation? 2020). India, one of the world's most populous nations, had a rather fragile health infrastructure. The Epidemic Diseases Act of 1897 played a significant role in the management and control of COVID-19 in India. This act empowered the central and state governments to take necessary measures to prevent and contain the spread of epidemic diseases. The act was utilized in the following ways:

- Legal Framework for Public Health Measures: During an outbreak, the Epidemic Diseases Act offers a framework for the enforcement of public health measures. It makes it possible for the government to give the required directives, rules, and commands to stop the spread of the disease. These actions include placing limitations on mobility, setting up facilities for quarantine, performing health exams, and requiring isolation or treatment.
- Enhanced Surveillance and Contact Tracing: Health authorities have been granted authority under the Act to conduct surveillance operations to track the spread of COVID-19. This entails contact tracing, identifying and isolating individuals who have had contact with infected people, and implementing quarantine measures to prevent the spread of the disease.
- Facilities for Quarantine and Isolation: The Act permits the construction of facilities for quarantine and isolation that will segregate and treat diseased people. It enables the government to designate specific locations for quarantine purposes and implement the necessary regulations to ensure the security and well-being of those under quarantine.
- The Epidemic Diseases Act allows the government to control public gatherings, including religious, social, and cultural activities, to stop the disease from spreading. It gives the government the power to implement travel bans, lockdowns, curfews, and other measures necessary to keep people apart and reduce the risk of spreading the disease.

Mumbai, in British India, was the first to pass the Epidemic Diseases Act of 1897 to combat the bubonic plague. By granting special powers necessary for the implementation of containment measures to control the spread of the disease, the law is intended to contain epidemics. This includes managing disasters through the preparation of mitigation strategies, capacity-building, and other related activities. While this act was used as a holistic legal measure, from a policy point of view, COVID-19 management in India was governed by strategies based on either the principle of centralization or decentralization.

Statement of the problem

The renowned public policy theorist emphatically defined public policy as "whatever government chooses to do or even not to do" (Dye, 1998). This definition can be further visualized in the context of COVID-19 management, as the government's response in this respect was critical in abating this crisis. Additionally, the government had to take action, and that action had to be both efficient and effective. In this respect, the most pertinent debate that emerged was how to handle the pandemic most effectively and efficiently, so that minimal resources could be used to ensure maximum benefits, namely, limiting casualties and reducing distress. While one side of the debate argued for centralization as the response, the other side argued for a decentralized response. Given these varied and competing approaches to crisis management, there is a need to empirically study which approach can serve as a panacea in such situations.

Centralization and Decentralization in the Indian Context

In the words of L.D. White, "The process of transfer of administrative authority from lower to higher levels of government is called centralization. Alternatively, the process of consolidating control, authority, and decision-making into one central body or authority is known as centralization. It entails the transfer of decision-making authority from local or regional entities at lower levels of administration to a central organization, frequently the national government. The goals of centralization are to

improve efficiency in decision-making and implementation, promote uniformity in policy, and simplify governance. Since the country's independence in 1947, centralization has played a significant role in the government structure of India. This centralization can be highlighted in the Indian context as follows:

- Constitution and Legal Framework: The Indian Constitution establishes a strong central government with a federal framework. Even while it gives both the federal government and state governments authority, some areas—known as the Union List—fall under the exclusive purview of the federal government. This scope encompasses matters such as defence, international relations, finance, and interstate trade.
- Provisions for Emergencies: The Constitution confers the federal government more authority in times of crisis. When the constitutional system fails, President's Rule allows the federal government to take immediate control of the state's administration. During a national emergency, the central government can take control over different facets of governance and centralize decision-making.
- Central Legislation: The Parliament, representing the central government, may pass laws that address issues on the Union List. Central laws that apply consistently throughout the nation, including the Companies Act, Income Tax Act, and Right to Information Act, are examples of centralization in policy development and execution.
- Financial Control: Centralization is facilitated by the central government's extensive control over financial resources. Through channels such as the Finance Commission, it collects taxes and distributes funds to states.

Having seen the centralization in the Indian context, it becomes imperative to see and examine decentralization in the Indian context too. According to Allen, "decentralization refers to the systematic effort to delegate to the lowest levels all authority except that which can only be exercised at central points." Decentralization is the process of transferring control, authority,

and decision-making from a top-down governing body to more local or regional entities. It entails the distribution of duties, assets, and decision-making authority to institutions at the local or subnational level. Effortless service delivery, local sovereignty, and democratic government are all goals of decentralization. Decentralization has been more important in recent years in the Indian setting as a way to resolve regional imbalances, increase local engagement, and improve governance. The key enablers for this type of governance in the Indian scenario include:

- Constitutional provisions: Decentralized government is valued in the Indian Constitution. Subjects covered by the Union List, State List, and Concurrent List are granted power to the federal government as well as state governments. To facilitate local decision-making and administration, the Constitution also permits the establishment of local self-government entities, such as municipalities and panchayats.
- The Panchayati Raj system was established in India to improve local government and decentralize authority. The formation of elected rural and urban local organizations known as Panchayats and Municipalities, respectively, was mandated by the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in 1992. These organizations now have access to more functions, funding, and control over decisions, which improves local accountability and involvement.
- Financial Decentralization: Decentralization in India is primarily characterized by financial decentralization. The Constitution established the Finance Commission to allocate financial resources between the federal government and the states. It enables local organizations to address local development goals by allowing for the devolution of finances, assuring them of financial independence.

Having understood and seen the concept of centralization and decentralization in the Indian context, it becomes imperative in our study to see its utility in terms of the COVID-19 management strategy. However, before studying them as strategies for COVID-19 management, it is

essential to address the topic of COVID-19 itself.

Centralized COVID-19 management in India

One example of centralized COVID-19 management in India was the nationwide lockdown imposed by the central government in March 2020 using the Epidemic Disease Act 1897 and the Disaster Management Act 2005. Its key elements and implications include Effective Response in the Face of a Pandemic: Measures Adopted by the Government of India to Combat COVID-19 (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2021).

- Nationwide Lockdown: Beginning on March 25, 2020, the federal government, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, imposed a rigorous statewide lockdown. This lockdown was intended to impose social segregation and movement restrictions to stop the COVID-19 virus from spreading.
- Strict Control Measures: During the lockdown, the central authority issued regulations and instructions that must be consistently adhered to across the nation. These regulations included the closure of schools, universities, and non-essential enterprises, as well as limitations on public gatherings.
- Travel Bans: The central government imposed travel bans, which included the cancellation of all internal and international flights, trains, and other forms of public transportation. This reduced the likelihood of viral transmission between areas by limiting human mobility.
- Economic assistance Measures: The central government established economic assistance packages and programs to assist disadvantaged members of society and companies harmed by the lockdown. This included direct cash transfers, the distribution of free food grains, and support for small and medium-sized businesses. One specific Program included in this assistance is the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojna.
- Communication and coordination: The central government regularly

briefed the public and provided updates on COVID-19 through various media outlets. To coordinate operations and exchange information, it also worked with state governments and had frequent meetings.

Decentralized COVID-19 Management in India.

Kerala Model

The policies and actions implemented by the state of Kerala, India, to successfully control and manage the transmission of the virus are referred to as the "Kerala Model" of COVID-19 management. Kerala's strategy has won national and international praise for its preemptive initiatives, robust healthcare system, and community involvement (Biswas, 2020). Let's examine the Kerala Model's essential components (Menon et al., 2020) with several illustrations:

Strong Healthcare System: The Kerala approach focuses on early identification, containment, and treatment, while prioritising basic healthcare services. For example, active monitoring, contact tracing, and community participation were all greatly aided by the massive network of primary health centres and village-level health workers in Kerala. Early detection and isolation of probable patients stopped the virus's spread.

Testing and Contact Tracing in Advance: Kerala established several testing facilities and conducted door-to-door surveys in high-risk areas. The state conducted extensive testing, mass testing, and sentinel surveillance to identify asymptomatic patients and halt community transmission.

Kerala prioritized honest and clear communication to ensure that the public received accurate information about health measures. Public briefings, awareness campaigns, and regular updates all contributed to the population's increased cooperation and sense of trust. For instance, the Kerala government held regular press conferences with health authorities who provided the latest information on the COVID-19 condition, precautions to take, and treatment guidelines.

Effective Facilities for Quarantine and Isolation: Such measures limited the virus's ability to propagate among populations. To accommodate those who couldn't isolate themselves at home, Kerala constructed several institutional quarantine centres, including schools, hostels, and hotels. Additionally, they made sure that these centres had medical resources and assistance services.

An integrated approach and interagency cooperation, Kerala's Incident Response System brought together representatives from multiple departments to coordinate resource allocation, treatment, contact tracing, testing, and monitoring. This interagency collaboration streamlined processes and made the most use of available resources.

It's crucial to remember that while the Kerala Model has been beneficial, its success may be due to several elements unique to the state's social, cultural, and healthcare setting (Responding to COVID-19—Learnings from Kerala, n.d.). The reaction from each location should be customized for its own set of conditions. The need for a robust public healthcare system, proactive testing and contact tracing, efficient communication, community participation, and interagency collaboration are highlighted by the Kerala Model of COVID-19 management. Together, these factors have supported Kerala's commendable efforts to stop the spread of COVID-19 and mitigate its effects.

Maharashtra Model

Due to its high population density and limited resources, Dharavi, one of the major slums in Mumbai, India, faced particular challenges in controlling the COVID-19 pandemic (Golechha, 2020). However, Dharavi and Mumbai as a whole showed a successful model of COVID-19 management via creative solutions and community involvement (Sahu et al., 2020). Let's examine the essential components of the Dharavi and Mumbai models using some illustrations:

Testing and comprehensive monitoring: Aggressive door-to-door

screening and testing were carried out to detect and isolate affected people in Dharavi. To provide simple access to testing facilities, temporary fever clinics and mobile testing vans were put up.

Containment Zones and Micro-level Planning: In Dharavi, the region was divided into smaller zones, and harsh measures were implemented in the containment zones, including closing off access and departure points, intensifying monitoring, and enforcing stringent lockdown procedures. This helped reduce the spread within the neighbourhood.

Community Participation and Local Leadership: Local community leaders in Dharavi played a crucial role in disseminating knowledge, promoting excellent hygiene habits, and ensuring that preventive measures were followed. They closely collaborated with authorities and healthcare professionals, coordinating activities and attending to the community's needs.

Healthcare Facilities and Isolation Facilities: Schools, community centres, and sports facilities in Dharavi were converted into quarantine and isolation facilities to accommodate suspected and confirmed patients. Enough medical personnel and resources were sent to these clinics to provide essential care.

The COVID-19 management in the Dharavi and Mumbai model demonstrates the value of community involvement, creative approaches, localized planning, and cooperation between governmental bodies, healthcare professionals, and the community. To slow the spread of the virus and deliver prompt medical care, this model emphasizes the importance of proactive testing, efficient communication, containment measures, and resource mobilization in highly populated regions.

Narratives of the Gram Sarpanches in Haryana.

To make the study more comprehensive, the researchers conducted interviews with village sarpanch (headmen) and democratically elected officials regarding the methods they employed in COVID-19 management.

Their views are highly important in our study, as they were the ones working closest to the field. Furthermore, Panchayats were leading the way in boosting community mobilisation and ensuring active surveillance, thanks to the Health Ministry's "Micro Plan for Containing Local Transmission of Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19)" and the government's allowance for panchayats to utilise funds earmarked under the 14th Finance Commission for COVID-19-related activities.

In these interviews, the sarpanches discussed their strategies and offered advice on what they and their electorate thought was an effective way to manage COVID-19. The researchers conducted interviews with five sarpanches in the state of Haryana. The sarpanches described the following strategies they employed:.

1. The Village Volunteer System involved selecting certain individuals who received financial benefits for serving as ad hoc workers for panchayats, assisting with tasks such as coordinating welfare programs and distributing relief.
2. The Gramme Panchayat converted the local infrastructure, like the primary schools and community centres, into a quarantine zone for the people of villages who were coming from outside.
3. Some Gram Sarpanch also talked about how they ensured barricades at the entry to villages, and at the barricades, sanitization drives were conducted.
4. The village market for essential products, like vegetables and other dairy products, was systematized so that people could maintain social distance. One of the sarpanches mentioned that there was home delivery for these products.
5. The gram panchayat used its funds to distribute masks, sanitisers, and soaps so that hygiene is maintained. Apart from the digital mode of information dissemination already being employed by the state and central governments, the gram panchayats conducted drives to

educate the people on hygiene maintenance, including proper hand washing and sneezing etiquette.

International case studies

To gain a better understanding of the entire COVID-19 management, it is also essential to examine the case studies of other countries in this regard. The case studies of foreign countries, too, will be viewed through the prism of dichotomy, i.e., one country employed centralization as a strategy, while another used decentralization to counter it. Several nations throughout the world have used centralization as a COVID-19 management technique. Here are a few instances of how centralization has been used in various nations:

China

China employed a centralized strategy to stop the spread of the virus. An illustration of China's centralized strategy is the rapid building of the Huoshenshan and Leishenshan hospitals in Wuhan. These facilities were created to care for COVID-19 patients, offering specialized treatment and relieving strain on the current healthcare system (Liu et al., 2022).

New Zealand

Under Jacinda Ardern's direction as prime minister, New Zealand implemented a centralized strategy. Example: New Zealand's "Elimination Strategy" aimed to eradicate the virus entirely within its borders. The efficiency of the centralized strategy was demonstrated by the central government's clear communication, prompt reaction, and rigorous measures, which resulted in a considerable decrease in COVID-19 instances (Baker et al., 2020).

South Korea

In order to tackle COVID-19, South Korea adopted a centralized plan that included comprehensive testing, contact tracing, and quarantine measures. Coordination, establishing policies, and giving money to local governments

were all important functions performed by the central government. The federal government established the "COVID-19 Smart Management System" to track and control the epidemic. (Yoo et al., 2021).

Australia

Australia's centralized strategy made it possible to implement uniform border security measures, travel restrictions, and quarantine procedures. Ensuring a coordinated response to the pandemic and allocating resources across various states and territories was made possible in large part by the National Cabinet (Chang et al., 2020).

The United Kingdom

The United Kingdom started with a decentralized strategy before switching to a more centralized one. In the UK, implementing the NHS Test and Trace Program is an example of a centralized strategy. This system was designed to track COVID-19 instances, coordinate testing efforts, and support individuals who had to isolate themselves (Iqbal et al., 2020).

Germany

Germany chose a decentralized strategy, with its federal states (Länder) principally responsible for decision-making and measure implementation. Each state could customise COVID-19 responses, including testing tactics, contact tracking, and regional lockdown measures, to fit its unique conditions. With a decentralized system, it was possible to respond quickly to local epidemics and adjust limitations as necessary (Kuhlman et al., 2021).

United States of America

The United States used a decentralized strategy, giving each state various levels of sovereignty. Example: Based on their unique COVID-19 circumstances, California, New York, and Texas adopted various tactics. While New York launched testing and contact tracing programs, California imposed tight stay-at-home directives and a staggered reopening schedule.

On the other hand, Texas took a more relaxed approach with fewer restrictions.

Canada

Canada used a decentralized strategy, with control of COVID-19 being under the purview of each province and territory. As an illustration, the province of British Columbia established a decentralized contact tracing method utilizing its mobile app, the "BC COVID-19 Support App." Users of this software may receive notifications and instructions if they encounter a verified case, which supports localised contact tracing efforts.

Findings, Suggestions, and Conclusions

This paper discusses centralization and decentralization as strategies for managing COVID-19 and has been examined using both primary and secondary data. This analysis has yielded a wealth of findings. We can discuss these findings in relation to the broader benefits of implementing a specific strategy.

The benefits and usability of a centralized strategy include

- Approach uniformity: Centralized management ensured that COVID-19 control measures were used consistently across the nation. As a result, a uniform framework for preventative measures, testing procedures, and treatment recommendations was developed. Example: The nationwide lockdown imposed by the central government in March 2020 provided a consistent framework for preventive measures, travel restrictions, and closure of non-essential services across all states and Union Territories.
- Coordination: The federal and state governments combined resources, knowledge, and best practices because increased coordination was made possible by centralization. Particularly in locations with larger caseloads, it facilitated the allocation of resources and decision-making processes. Example: The central government coordinated the distribution of medical supplies and

equipment, such as ventilators and oxygen concentrators, to states and Union Territories during the second wave of COVID-19 in 2021. This centralized approach helped in addressing the urgent needs of the affected regions.

- Effective crisis communication: A centralized approach to communication ensured uniform messaging to the public, minimizing ambiguity and improving adherence to preventative actions. Regular updates from the central authorities helped foster confidence and provided clarity during times of uncertainty. The central government, for instance, regularly held news conferences and provided information on COVID-19 through national media channels, reaching a large audience nationwide. During the epidemic, these briefings gave the public crucial information, clarifications, and assurances.
- Resource Allocation: Because of centralized management, the federal government established the PM CARES Fund to raise money and resources for COVID-19 relief operations. Contributions to this fund came from people, organizations, and governments, and they were used for medical infrastructure, research, and humanitarian efforts.
- Guidelines Enforcement: Centralized management enabled efficient guidelines and rules enforcement. The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) received instructions from the central government to establish uniform testing rules and procedures nationwide. This systematic method made gathering reliable data for evaluation and decision-making easier.

It is crucial to remember that while centralization provides some benefits, it also has drawbacks. The decentralized strategy provides flexible decision-making and customized responses depending on regional requirements. Owing to these, the benefit of decentralization as a strategy for COVID-19

management becomes evident and can be seen in the following ways (Dutta & Fischer, 2021).

- Localised Decision-Making: Decentralization enables local governments to decide under their areas' particular requirements and circumstances. In Kerala, for instance, the state government gave towns and panchayats the authority to take proactive measures to control the epidemic.
- Effective Resource Distribution:. Targeting locations that need additional testing equipment, medical supplies, and healthcare professionals enables optimal resource allocation (Kaushal & Mahajan, 2021). In Maharashtra, for instance, the state government used a decentralized strategy by providing funding and establishing special COVID-19 care facilities in places with many patients, including Mumbai and Pune. This facilitated prompt medical assistance and efficient case management during the spike in instances.
- Local Expertise and Knowledge: For instance, in Rajasthan, the state government collaborated with village-level health professionals like Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs), who were essential in educating the public, conducting surveys, and offering assistance to vulnerable rural communities.
- Community Involvement and Ownership: As an illustration, the state government of Odisha worked with local communities, self-help organisations, and youth clubs to raise awareness about COVID-19 and implement preventative measures. These neighbourhood-based programs helped encourage behavioural adjustments and ensure that rules were followed.
- Effective Communication and Trust-Building: The state government of Telangana decentralized communication efforts by enlisting the aid of local elected officials and community leaders in

disseminating knowledge about COVID-19 and preventative actions. This strategy promoted credibility and trust among the general public.

Having observed the advantages and case studies of both strategies, it is now necessary to address the final research objective of the paper, which is to determine which strategy was more effective in containing COVID-19 and could serve as a solution for future shocks. In the course of writing this research paper, we discovered that pinpointing one strategy as a one-size-fits-all approach would be a recipe for disaster. The best way shall be a delicate balance of both centralization and decentralization. This view was also echoed in the interviews conducted with Gram Sarpanches, who stated that giving them the power to micro-manage their village was significant, as they were closest to the ground; however, the role of the central government could not be discounted. The latter's support was required for providing broad guidelines, researching the disease and its spread, and disseminating best practices employed, among other tasks. Thus, to provide suggestions for containing any future shock that minimises casualties and economic loss, a combination of centralization and decentralization should be implemented. This can be done by centralization of essential activities that are beyond the local level capacity, like research and development, initial curbs and directives, economic sanctions, etc. As the problem gains greater awareness and manageability, we should gradually transfer the primary authority to the state or local levels. When steps like this are made, it ensures context-specific solutions that involve local people and thus better results. This scenario was also evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, where states like Odisha delegated the power of the District Collector to sarpanches to impose lockdowns and quarantine. Furthermore, a harmonious mix of centralization and decentralization will not only be effective in promoting solutions to emerging challenges but also in promoting the fulfilment of democracy, enriching concepts of subsidiarity and cooperative federalism, which the makers of the Indian Constitution and even Mahatma Gandhi envisioned.

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Panjab University Research Journal (Arts)
VOL. LVI 212-242 (July-December 2025) *ISSN: 0970-5260*

Impostor Syndrome and Self-Doubt among Women in STEM Education: Insights from Case Studies at the University of Delhi

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Abstract

Impostor syndrome has quietly become one of the most pervasive barriers for women in science—less visible than glass ceilings, yet just as suffocating. Even in spaces where they achieve distinction, many women carry the gnawing fear that they are frauds, surviving by luck rather than by ability. In India, this struggle unfolds in a particularly complex landscape: official statistics suggest near parity in certain life sciences, yet engineering and technology remain starkly male-dominated, and the transition from STEM classrooms to the workforce exhibits steep gender attrition. Beneath these numbers lie entrenched structures of patriarchy, institutional cultures of harsh critique, pressures of marriage and caregiving, linguistic hierarchies privileging English over regional languages, and financial precarity that turns every academic delay into a family crisis. Impostor feelings emerge not as private insecurities but as symptoms of these wider forces, quietly eroding women's confidence and reinforcing exclusion in subtle but devastating ways. This study draws on primary qualitative data from women postgraduate and doctoral scholars at the University of Delhi to illuminate how impostor syndrome is socially produced, lived, and endured. By situating impostorism as both a psychological and sociological condition, the paper argues for systemic interventions that align with India's STI Policy and global commitments under the SDGs, ensuring that women in STEM are not merely present but can thrive without apology.

Keywords: Impostor Syndrome, Women in STEM, Higher Education in India, Gender and Science, Qualitative Case Studies, Sociological Perspectives

Introduction

"Don't let anyone rob you of your imagination, your creativity, or your curiosity. It's your place in the world—make it the life you want to live." ~ ***Mae Jemison***

Being a woman in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) often means living in two worlds at once. On paper, she may be brilliant — admitted to prestigious programs, publishing papers, clearing examinations. Yet, within, she often carries an unshakable doubt: *"What if I do not belong here? What if they discover I am not as capable as they think?"* This quiet, invisible burden is what psychologists Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes (1978) named the **Impostor Phenomenon**. They described high-achieving women who, despite evidence of success, were unable to internalise their achievements and lived with the persistent fear of being "found out."

Despite India leading the world in the absolute number of female STEM graduates, deep gender disparities persist in both higher education and professional STEM fields. According to the Ministry of Education (2024), women now constitute 43% of total enrolment in STEM disciplines—a figure that marks progress but also reveals persistent gaps, especially at higher academic and leadership levels. For instance, while enrolment in biology programs approaches parity, fields like engineering and technology see female representation fall to 15% and 21% respectively. More troubling is the "leaky pipeline" phenomenon (Etzkowitz et al., 2000): only 29% of Indian women who graduate in STEM join the STEM workforce, indicating a significant loss of talent due to cultural, structural, and psychological barriers.

Among these barriers, impostor syndrome has emerged as a silent epidemic, disproportionately affecting women in competitive academic environments such as STEM. Recent research from Eastern India (2025) found that over 90% of women STEM students experience moderate to severe impostor feelings, often triggered by stereotypes, lack of mentors, assessment uncertainty, and shifting learning modalities in the post-

pandemic era. These internalised doubts manifest in self-limiting behaviours—hesitating to apply for fellowships, presenting research, or pursuing leadership roles—even among high achievers. The psychological burden, compounded by societal pressures around marriage and gendered career expectations, underscores impostor syndrome as both an individual and structural challenge.

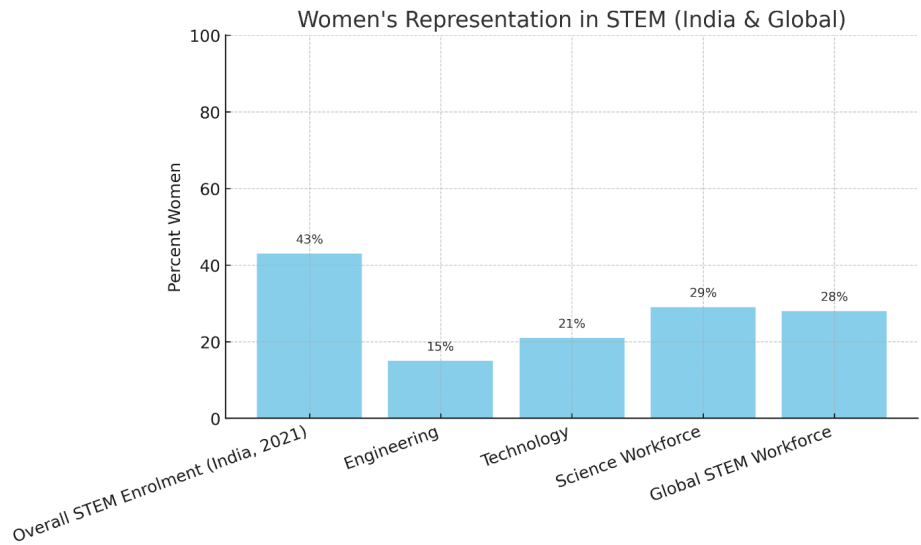

Figure 1: Women's Representation in STEM (India & Global)

Source: AISHE 2021; World Bank; UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

Figure 1 visualises the gender disparity in STEM education and workforce: although women constitute around 43% of overall higher education enrolment in India, their representation in engineering and STEM professional roles remains significantly lower.

In the context of Indian higher education, the urgency is clear. As India invests in programs like the Women Scientists Scheme and Vigyan Jyoti Initiative to bridge the gender gap in STEM, understanding the lived experiences of self-doubt and impostorism becomes crucial. Recent studies corroborate the high prevalence of impostor phenomenon among women students, particularly those navigating postgraduate and doctoral pathways

in elite institutions, where resource scarcity and cultural bias intertwine.

In the decades since, impostor syndrome has been recognised as a widespread psychological challenge, but its presence in STEM fields is particularly striking. The sciences have long been coded as masculine domains. As Valian (1999) observed, gender schemas systematically undervalue women's competence, so that men are assumed to be capable until proven otherwise, while women must continually prove themselves to be seen as legitimate. This hidden bias seeps into classrooms, laboratories, and seminar halls, creating what scholars call the "chilly climate" of STEM education (Hall & Sandler, 1982). In such climates, impostor feelings do not arise in isolation; they are cultivated and reinforced.

The metaphor of the 'leaky pipeline' aptly captures the attrition of women from STEM fields as they progress through education and careers. Yet what leaks out is not only numbers, but also confidence, belonging, and dreams. Impostor syndrome is one of the silent forces behind this leakage. It shapes decisions in subtle yet devastating ways: a researcher avoids presenting her work, and a doctoral scholar wonders if she is "good enough" to complete her studies. As Clance (1985) later emphasised, the damage lies not in lack of ability but in the inability to believe in one's own ability.

The Indian context adds further layers. Societal expectations that prioritise marriage over higher education for women, family doubts about "too much study," and the scarcity of female role models in STEM all magnify impostor feelings. A young woman may therefore carry not just the weight of equations and experiments, but also of cultural judgments about what she "should" be doing instead. As Blickenstaff (2005) reminds us, equity in STEM cannot be measured by access alone; it must be measured by whether women can thrive once they are inside.

This paper takes up that challenge. By focusing on women students of STEM at the University of Delhi, it seeks to uncover how impostor syndrome manifests in their everyday academic lives, what cultural and institutional factors intensify it, and how it shapes their confidence and aspirations. Through six detailed case studies, it highlights voices often

unheard in policy debates — voices that tell us not just whether women are present in STEM, but how they *feel* while being there. In doing so, the study argues that dismantling gender barriers in STEM requires attention not only to resources and opportunities, but also to the psychological landscapes in which women pursue their ambitions.

Theoretical Framework

Labelling Theory: Developed by Howard Becker (1963), labelling theory argues that deviance and identity are shaped by the labels society imposes. In the context of women in STEM, when female students are labelled as "less capable" or "not serious about science," these stereotypes often become internalised, reinforcing impostor feelings and self-doubt. This framework helps explain how external social judgments contribute to women's internal struggles with legitimacy in academic spaces.

Feminist Standpoint Theory: Rooted in the works of Dorothy Smith (1987) and Nancy Hartsock (1983), feminist standpoint theory emphasises that women's social positions provide a unique and legitimate standpoint for knowledge. Applied to STEM education, it highlights how women's lived experiences — including feelings of exclusion and impostorism — are shaped by patriarchal structures. This perspective validates women's voices as central to understanding gender inequities in STEM.

Social Capital Theory: Pierre Bourdieu (1986) introduced the concept of social capital to describe how networks, resources, and relationships shape opportunities. For women in STEM, limited access to influential mentors, peer networks, or professional connections can exacerbate feelings of impostor syndrome, as they lack the cultural and social resources that reinforce belonging. This framework helps explain how inequalities in access to support systems intensify psychological insecurities.

Role Theory: Originating in the works of Ralph Linton (1936) and further elaborated by Robert K. Merton (1957), role theory examines how individuals balance the expectations of multiple social roles. Women in STEM often experience role conflict — managing family responsibilities

alongside academic demands. This conflict deepens impostor feelings, as success in one role may feel like failure in another. Role theory thus provides a lens to understand how competing expectations contribute to women's self-doubt in scientific fields.

Psychological Theories

Self-Efficacy Theory: Developed by Albert Bandura, self-efficacy theory posits that an individual's belief in their own ability to succeed in specific situations greatly influences their actions, resilience in facing setbacks, and persistence toward goals. In the context of women in STEM, impostor syndrome can be understood as a chronic deficit in self-efficacy—a persistent sense of incompetence even amid objective markers of success. Research suggests that socialisation processes often undermine girls' confidence in science and mathematics from an early age, producing a legacy of diminished self-efficacy that follows women into higher education and research careers. Within academia, episodes of success—such as publishing a paper or clearing a comprehensive exam—are often attributed by impostor-affected women to external factors (luck, timing, or support) rather than personal merit or skill, further eroding self-efficacy.

Attribution Theory: Bernard Weiner's attribution theory investigates how individuals explain causes of successes and failures, shaping emotional responses and future motivation. Impostor syndrome among women in STEM is frequently marked by maladaptive attributional styles: achievements are often ascribed to unstable, external, or uncontrollable causes like chance or timely assistance, rather than to skill or effort. Failures, on the other hand, are interpreted as evidence of inherent inability or lack of belonging. This pattern is closely linked to stereotype threat, where awareness of gender stereotypes about women's scientific competence exacerbates the tendency to doubt one's legitimacy. Over time, such attributions create a psychological environment in which even high-achieving women internalise a sense of not "really" belonging in scientific fields.

Cognitive Distortion Theory: Cognitive distortion theory, rooted in the work of Aaron Beck and expanded by Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes in their foundational study of the impostor phenomenon, describes how consistent patterns of negative thinking distort the perception of self and academic reality. Women affected by impostor syndrome commonly display cognitive errors such as catastrophizing (expecting the worst outcome), discounting positives (rejecting evidence of merit), and all-or-nothing thinking (equating minor errors with total inadequacy). Perfectionism—a central cognitive distortion—drives women to set unrealistically high standards for themselves and view any deviation as proof of fraudulence. In STEM settings, this can manifest as reluctance to contribute in seminars, persistent over-preparation, or withdrawal from competitive opportunities, all of which compound isolation and reinforce self-doubt.

Review of Literature

Clance and Imes (1978) first introduced the concept of the *Impostor Phenomenon* in their seminal study on high-achieving women. They observed that many women, despite clear evidence of competence, were unable to internalise their accomplishments and lived in fear of being "exposed" as frauds. This foundational work highlighted the psychological dimension of gender inequality and established the groundwork for future research into impostor syndrome, particularly in male-dominated fields such as STEM.

Valian (1999), in her influential book on gender schemas, argued that cultural stereotypes systematically undervalue women's competence and inflate men's achievements. She noted that women in science and mathematics are often judged more harshly, needing to repeatedly prove themselves to be taken seriously. These subtle but persistent biases contribute to impostor feelings, as women come to believe that their success is less legitimate than that of their male peers.

Blickenstaff (2005) examined gender disparities in STEM through the metaphor of the "leaky pipeline," where women gradually drop out at

successive stages of education and career progression. He emphasised that access alone does not guarantee equity; instead, retention and thriving within academic spaces are critical. Psychological barriers, including impostor syndrome, play a key role in creating what Hall and Sandler (1982) earlier described as the "chilly climate" in classrooms and laboratories.

Adamo (2013) investigated gender differences in career trajectories between biology and medicine. She found that while women and men enrol in graduate biology programs at similar rates, women are less likely to pursue academic research careers. In contrast, medicine has been more successful in retaining women, despite heavy workloads. Adamo attributed this to the timing of competition: while medicine's peak competition occurs before family responsibilities begin, in biology it coincides with faculty job searches, intensifying the pressures on women and increasing their vulnerability to impostor feelings.

Banchefsky et al. (2016) explored how feminine appearance influences perceptions of women scientists. Using photographs of tenure-track faculty at research universities, they found that women who were rated as more feminine were perceived as less likely to be scientists and more likely to be early childhood educators. No such effect was observed for male scientists. This study highlighted the additional burden women face in STEM, where even appearance can undermine perceptions of their legitimacy, further feeding impostor experiences.

Parkman (2016) reviewed impostor phenomenon in the workplace, underscoring its impact on women's career advancement. She emphasised that impostor syndrome is not only an individual struggle but also an organisational issue, as it discourages women from applying for leadership roles, negotiating salaries, or seeking promotions. Parkman argued that addressing impostor syndrome requires structural support within institutions, not just personal coping strategies.

Devasmita Chakraverty's (2020, 2022) series of qualitative studies remains among the most influential contributions from India. Her research

with doctoral scholars and faculty in STEM disciplines at the Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad demonstrates how peer comparison, institutional hierarchy, and limited mentorship amplify impostor tendencies among women academics. Participants in these studies described persistent anxiety over public speaking, hesitancy to seek guidance, and internalisation of credibility threats — experiences that mirror many narratives in the present paper's Delhi University case studies. Chakraverty's work situates impostorism not as pathology, but as an outcome of systemic academic elitism coupled with socialised gender expectations that deter assertive self-advocacy in women.

A study conducted at **McMaster University (2023)** investigated impostor syndrome rates among female-identifying undergraduates in STEM compared with non-STEM fields. The findings revealed that STEM students, especially women, were more likely to experience heightened impostor tendencies than peers in non-STEM disciplines. The study further emphasised the intersectional effects of gender and field of study, showing that the competitive and male-dominated climate of STEM amplifies self-doubt and feelings of illegitimacy. This evidence strengthens the argument that impostor syndrome disproportionately impacts women in STEM worldwide, resonating with the experiences of Indian students in the present study.

De et al. (2024) examined the prevalence of impostor phenomenon among MBBS students at Muzaffarnagar Medical College in Uttar Pradesh, India. The study found that nearly 39% of respondents reported severe impostor tendencies, with a significant association between impostorism and symptoms of depression. Importantly, the study highlighted gendered differences, with female students reporting higher levels of impostor experiences compared to their male counterparts. This research underscores that impostor syndrome in India is not confined to STEM at large but is also strongly present in medical education, where high performance and social expectations intersect. It reinforces the sociological framing that impostor feelings are shaped by structural and cultural pressures, not merely individual self-doubt.

Dixit and Ashutosh (2024) studied impostor tendencies among Indian university students, comparing those in government and private institutions. Their results showed that students in government universities reported higher impostor feelings and self-handicapping behaviours. The authors suggested that institutional prestige, faculty support, and competitive culture may shape these experiences. This study adds an important Indian perspective, revealing how local contexts interact with psychological barriers in shaping women's confidence in STEM.

Singh and Vanka's (2024) qualitative investigation, *"Everyone Here Is Smarter Than Me"*, extends this discussion to women re-entering the technology workforce after career interruptions. Drawing on interviews with thirty-one Indian professionals, their study explores how family responsibilities, career breaks, and the male-dominated culture of the IT sector engender imposter experiences during reentry. Women reported underplaying achievements and avoiding leadership roles due to perceived inadequacy despite objective competence. The study underscores the gendered nature of workplace reintegration, where institutional support mechanisms and flexible policies remain minimal.

At the undergraduate level, a recent large-scale study by **Banerjee et al. (2025)** at Eastern Indian universities examined the *"Prevalence and Factor Structure of Impostor Phenomenon"* among college students. Over 34% of female STEM undergraduates reported high impostor scores, attributing their feelings to gendered classroom interactions, linguistic disadvantage, and lack of mentorship. Students educated in Hindi-medium or regional-language institutions before university faced acute comparative anxiety upon transitioning to English-medium instruction environments. This linguistic intersection is also echoed by Saba's narrative in the present study, illustrating how language acts as both a structural and psychological barrier to belonging.

Another significant study, *Impostor Syndrome in Academic and Professional Contexts* by **Panda and Das (2025)**, synthesises evidence from Indian college and medical students to demonstrate links between

impostorism and psychosocial stress. Their review, published in the Indian Journal of Psychology and Mental Health, identifies that in collectivist Indian societies, family reputation and parental expectations act as salient cultural triggers for self-doubt, particularly among female students striving to uphold familial prestige.

Identification of Research Gaps

A thorough review of the existing literature on impostor syndrome reveals several critical gaps that this study aims to address. Firstly, much of the scholarship to date has focused predominantly on Western contexts or specific professional groups such as medical interns or high-achieving individuals, limiting the diversity of socio-cultural perspectives, especially within India. Indian studies, while growing, remain relatively sparse and often focus on urban elite or faculty populations, with limited exploration of regional, linguistic, and caste-based variations that profoundly shape academic experiences.

Secondly, although psychological dimensions such as anxiety, self-doubt, and cognitive distortions have been extensively examined, there remains a need for more comprehensive integration of these with sociological frameworks that consider systemic, institutional, and cultural factors unique to India. For example, collectivist family expectations and deeply embedded patriarchal norms continue to influence women's academic trajectories but are under-addressed in cross-disciplinary syntheses.

Thirdly, few studies have longitudinally examined the evolution of impostor feelings across different stages of the STEM pipeline, from undergraduate education through doctoral studies to faculty positions. This lack of a developmental perspective hinders understanding of how impostor syndrome manifests and potentially intensifies or diminishes over time within Indian educational contexts.

Fourthly, there is an evident scarcity of research on coping mechanisms and institutional interventions tailored for Indian women in STEM, including mentorship dynamics, language support, and culturally sensitive mental

health resources. The “leaky pipeline” phenomenon is well documented in terms of attrition rates but poorly understood in terms of psychological precursors and supports necessary to promote retention.

Finally, much of the quantitative research overlooks qualitative lived experiences that reveal nuanced barriers such as language disadvantages and microaggressions within classrooms—factors critical to shaping identity and belonging in scholarship, as illustrated in this paper’s Delhi University case studies and corroborated by Eastern Indian undergraduate research.

This study addresses these gaps by adopting an intersectional and qualitative case study approach, foregrounding women’s voices across diverse socio-economic and linguistic backgrounds. It aims to enrich theoretical understanding by bridging psychological, sociological, and cultural dimensions of impostor syndrome specific to Indian STEM education.

Rationale and Significance of the Study

Despite the growing participation of women in higher education, their representation in STEM disciplines remains uneven, with a sharp decline as they progress to advanced levels of study and research. Much of the existing scholarship on this issue has concentrated on structural factors such as lack of resources, family responsibilities, and institutional biases, but the psychological dimension—particularly impostor syndrome—has received comparatively little attention in the Indian context. Impostor syndrome, defined as the persistent feeling of self-doubt and the fear of being exposed as a fraud despite evidence of competence, is not simply an individual weakness but a reflection of broader cultural and institutional expectations. In highly competitive spaces such as the Faculty of Science at the University of Delhi, women students often find themselves negotiating multiple pressures, ranging from gendered stereotypes to family responsibilities, which intensify impostor experiences. This study is significant because it does not merely quantify the prevalence of impostor

syndrome but instead uses qualitative case studies to uncover the lived experiences of women postgraduate and doctoral students, offering insights into how they interpret and negotiate their academic journeys.

By situating impostorism within sociological frameworks, the research highlights how self-doubt is socially constructed, reinforced, and reproduced within academic institutions. The findings of this study carry important implications: they enrich theoretical understanding by moving beyond psychological explanations, contribute empirical evidence from the Indian higher education context where such work is scarce, and provide practical insights for universities and policymakers to design mentorship programs, support systems, and institutional interventions. Most importantly, the study foregrounds women's voices, reframing impostor syndrome not as an individual flaw but as a product of social structures, thereby underscoring the urgency of creating academic environments where women can not only enter STEM but also thrive with confidence and recognition.

Research Objectives

- To explore the lived experiences of impostor syndrome among women students in STEM education at the University of Delhi.
- To identify the psychological, familial, and institutional factors contributing to impostor feelings.
- To briefly examine the coping mechanisms and support systems used by women students to deal with impostor feelings.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study followed a qualitative case study design to understand impostor syndrome among women students in STEM. Case studies provide scope for rich, detailed narratives that reveal the complexity of lived experiences in specific institutional contexts.

Sample and Participants

The sample comprised six women students enrolled in postgraduate and doctoral programs in STEM within the Faculty of Science, University of Delhi. A purposive sampling method was adopted to select participants who could provide diverse perspectives in terms of age, socio-economic background, and academic discipline. The aim was not to generalise statistically but to capture rich, context-specific accounts of impostor experiences.

Data Collection

Primary data was gathered through semi-structured interviews. Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes and was conducted in a language comfortable to the participant (English or Hindi). Interviews were recorded with consent and later transcribed verbatim. Open-ended questions guided the conversations, encouraging participants to reflect freely on their academic journeys, their feelings of self-doubt, and their strategies for coping.

From these interviews, six detailed case studies were constructed. Each case study synthesised the participant's background, experiences of impostor syndrome, and reflections on the role of family, peers, faculty, and institutional culture. Pseudonyms were assigned to ensure anonymity, and identifying details were removed or altered.

Ethical safeguards were followed throughout. Participants gave informed consent and were assured of confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time. Because impostor syndrome involves sensitive reflections on self-esteem and personal challenges, special care was taken to present participants' voices respectfully and without distortion.

Case Study 1: Radhika (pseudonym)

Radhika, a 24-year-old postgraduate student of Chemistry, often described her academic journey as a battle between her achievements on paper and the unease she carried within. Coming from a middle-class family in Delhi

where her father worked as a bank clerk and her mother managed the household, she had grown up hearing she was the "bright one" destined to make her parents proud, yet that very praise became a burden as she feared she could never live up to it. Despite being among the top in her class, she confided, *"I feel like any day someone will ask me a question I cannot answer and they will know I don't actually belong here."* In her department, male classmates dominated discussions and often dismissed her contributions, while relatives reminded her that *"a master's is enough for a girl,"* leaving her torn between pursuing her ambitions and conforming to marriage expectations. She admitted to over-preparing for even routine lab work, redoing experiments late into the night, not because her data was wrong but because she could not silence the inner voice that whispered she might have missed something. What steadied her was the quiet support of a close friend in the program who also struggled with similar doubts. *"When she says she feels the same, I realise it's not just me,"* Radhika said softly, recognising how friendship gave her a fragile but real sense of belonging. Encouragement from a faculty member who urged her to present her work more confidently also helped, though she still hesitated to put herself forward. For Radhika, impostor syndrome meant living at the crossroads of ambition, expectation, and scrutiny, where the fear of not being enough shadowed every step forward.

Case Study 2: Meera (pseudonym)

Meera, a 29-year-old doctoral scholar in Mathematics, often said that her journey felt like walking on glass—every step forward accompanied by the fear of shattering under the weight of expectations. Coming from a rural background in Haryana, she was the first in her family to cross the threshold of higher education. While her father proudly introduced her as *"our daughter, the researcher in Delhi,"* Meera confessed that these words sometimes tightened the knot of anxiety in her chest. *"They think I am exceptional, but what if I am just average and it all comes crashing down?"* she admitted, her voice betraying the unease behind her smile. Unlike many

of her peers, she had to constantly juggle household responsibilities along with her academic work, often travelling back to her village on weekends to help her mother, which left her drained and behind in coursework. Within her department, she felt invisible in seminars where discussions were monopolised by a handful of confident male students. *"It feels like they occupy the room, and I am just a guest allowed to sit quietly,"* she remarked. Even when she solved complex problems successfully, she struggled to accept her own competence, attributing it to luck or timing. The impostor feelings were strongest when she compared herself to peers from urban, English-speaking backgrounds, whose fluency and ease with professors made her feel like an outsider. Yet, Meera found resilience in unexpected places—her closest coping strategy was immersing herself in teaching undergraduate tutorials, where the gratitude of her students reminded her that she did, in fact, possess knowledge worth sharing. She also leaned on a senior woman mathematician in the department, whose informal guidance became a source of encouragement. *"She told me once, 'Don't measure your worth in their language—mathematics itself is your language,' and that stayed with me,"* Meera recalled with a rare spark of confidence. For her, impostor syndrome was not a passing insecurity but a daily negotiation between pride in breaking barriers and the relentless fear of not deserving the space she occupied.

Case Study 3: Kavita (pseudonym)

Kavita, a 26-year-old doctoral student in Chemistry, often described her research life as a cycle of excitement quickly followed by crippling doubt. Coming from a small town in Himachal Pradesh, she had worked hard to earn her place in the doctoral program, but instead of celebrating her achievement, she constantly feared being exposed as "not good enough." She admitted, *"When I enter the lab, I feel like everyone else belongs there naturally, and I am just trying to catch up."* Her impostor feelings were reinforced by the culture of her department, where faculty feedback often came in the form of sharp public criticism. She recalled a seminar where, after she stumbled on a question, a professor remarked, *"You should know*

this by now," and though the words were brief, they stayed with her for months as proof that she was undeserving. Kavita explained that while male colleagues often brushed off such comments, she internalised them as evidence of her incompetence. At the same time, family pressures quietly added to her anxiety—her parents were proud, but relatives questioned why she was "still studying" at her age. *"They think I am wasting time,"* she said softly, acknowledging how these remarks made her feel selfish for pursuing a doctorate. The financial strain of living in Delhi on a modest fellowship also weighed heavily, leaving her little room for mistakes. To cope, Kavita often over-prepared presentations, rehearsing them late into the night until she could deliver every slide without pause. She also leaned on the support of a small circle of doctoral peers who reassured each other after difficult faculty interactions. *"When they tell me they feel the same, I realise I am not weak—it's the system that makes us feel this way,"* she reflected. For Kavita, impostor syndrome was not only an internal struggle but a battle shaped by academic culture, financial stress, and the constant fear that every stumble might prove she did not belong in science.

Case Study 4: Saba (pseudonym)

Saba, a 25-year-old M.Sc. student in Physics, carried with her a sense of quiet determination when she first arrived from a small town in Uttar Pradesh, but that determination was quickly overshadowed by the weight of language and cultural barriers. Having studied in Hindi-medium schools all her life, she found herself struggling to follow lectures delivered in rapid English, and group discussions often left her silent. *"Sometimes the words move faster than my mind, and I just sit there pretending to understand,"* she admitted with a weary smile. Her impostor feelings grew sharper each time she compared herself to classmates from metropolitan schools who seemed to speak effortlessly, earning the attention of professors. In labs and seminars, she kept her head down, terrified that any mistake in language would expose her as "unfit" for science. *"I know the answer in my head, but the fear of saying it wrong keeps me quiet,"* she confessed. The silence

soon fed her doubts, convincing her that perhaps she did not belong in a space dominated by confident, English-speaking peers. Family expectations did not ease the strain; while her parents proudly told neighbours that their daughter studied physics in Delhi, her uncles and aunts questioned whether "such a difficult subject" was worth pursuing, especially since marriage proposals had begun arriving. The pressure mounted until she seriously contemplated leaving the program midway. *"I thought maybe it is better to quit before everyone finds out I cannot manage,"* she whispered, describing nights when she packed her bag only to unpack it again at dawn. What kept her tethered, however fragile the thread, was the gentle encouragement of a senior research scholar who took the time to explain concepts in Hindi, reminding her that her struggles did not mean incapacity. She also found strength in occasional calls from her father, who told her, *"Even if you feel small there, you are still doing something none of us could."* These fleeting reassurances prevented her from giving up entirely, but for Saba, impostor syndrome was not just about self-doubt—it was an exhausting battle against language, culture, and the thought of walking away from a dream she had barely begun to live.

Case Study 5: Ananya (pseudonym)

Ananya, a 28-year-old PhD scholar in Physics, often described her academic life as walking a tightrope where even the smallest slip could mean disaster, not only for her career but for her family, who depended on her. Coming from a lower-middle-class family in Himachal Pradesh, she was the eldest of three siblings, and the monthly fellowship she received was not only her survival in Delhi but also a crucial contribution to her household back home. *"Sometimes I feel I am not just studying for myself but carrying my entire family's weight on my shoulders,"* she said, her words heavy with exhaustion. This financial pressure deepened her impostor feelings—every mistake in the lab felt magnified, every delay in her research a potential reason for losing her fellowship. *"If I don't publish in time or clear reviews, I feel like they will see I don't deserve the stipend I get,"* she admitted, confessing how she often worked late nights until her

health began to falter. The academic environment did little to ease her worries; professors often emphasised productivity and output, and she felt invisible next to peers who seemed free from the financial burdens she carried. At home, relatives reminded her that "it is time to think about marriage," leaving her torn between her obligations and aspirations. Yet, Ananya found fragile coping mechanisms to keep herself afloat—she maintained a small notebook where she wrote down every positive feedback she received, from a professor's brief "good job" to a student's gratitude in tutorials, so she could return to those words on nights when despair overwhelmed her. She also confided in a senior scholar who told her, *"You are not here because of charity; you earned this seat,"* a reminder that helped her breathe a little easier. Still, the fear of slipping, of losing both her fellowship and her place in academia, shadowed every success, making impostor syndrome for Ananya not just a private anxiety but a battle intertwined with financial survival and family responsibility.

Case Study 6: Priya (pseudonym)

Priya, a 23-year-old postgraduate student of Biology, often carried within her the strange contradiction of being celebrated at home yet doubted within the spaces where she most wanted to belong. Growing up in Haryana, her parents encouraged her dream of studying science, but the whispers of her extended family often reached her ears—*"enough education for a girl, now marriage should come first."* While she ignored them outwardly, those words settled inside her, resurfacing in moments when she struggled in class or stumbled in the lab. *"It feels like my success is temporary, like one mistake will prove they were right all along,"* she confessed, her eyes clouded more by fear than by failure. In the department, the subtler currents of gender stereotypes made her insecurities heavier; when male peers were invited to lead experiments or speak in seminars while women were expected to remain on the margins, Priya found herself shrinking even when her ideas were strong. *"It is as if our hard work is recognised, but brilliance is reserved for them,"* she said quietly. Each success she achieved felt

borrowed, as though she was standing on ground that could give way at any time. And yet, she fought against the erosion of her confidence by preserving small evidence of her worth—a diary where she wrote down each successful experiment, every word of encouragement she received from a faculty mentor, every moment when she proved herself wrong about not being enough. She also drew strength from the company of two other women from Haryana who, like her, had grown up under the same gaze of expectation, and in their conversations she found relief: *"When they tell me they feel the same, I know I am not alone."* For Priya, impostor syndrome was not only the private burden of self-doubt; it was the echo of cultural scripts, institutional silences, and the constant weight of stereotypes pressing against her shoulders, leaving her both proud of the ground she had claimed and afraid that at any moment it could be taken away.

Thematic Data Analysis

To arrive at the three central themes, each case study was carefully coded line by line to identify recurring patterns in the participants' narratives. Experiences such as self-doubt, over-preparation, invisibility in academic spaces, or comparison with peers were grouped into the first theme of fear of exposure/self-doubt. Pressures arising from gendered family expectations, financial responsibilities, institutional practices, and language barriers were organised under the second theme of family and institutional pressures. Coping strategies—such as peer solidarity, mentorship, personal affirmations, or over-preparation—were collectively synthesised into the third theme of coping mechanisms and resilience. The visual representation (Figure 2) demonstrates how insights from six detailed case studies converged into these three overarching themes through thematic analysis. This process highlights that the themes were not predetermined but emerged inductively from the participants' lived experiences.

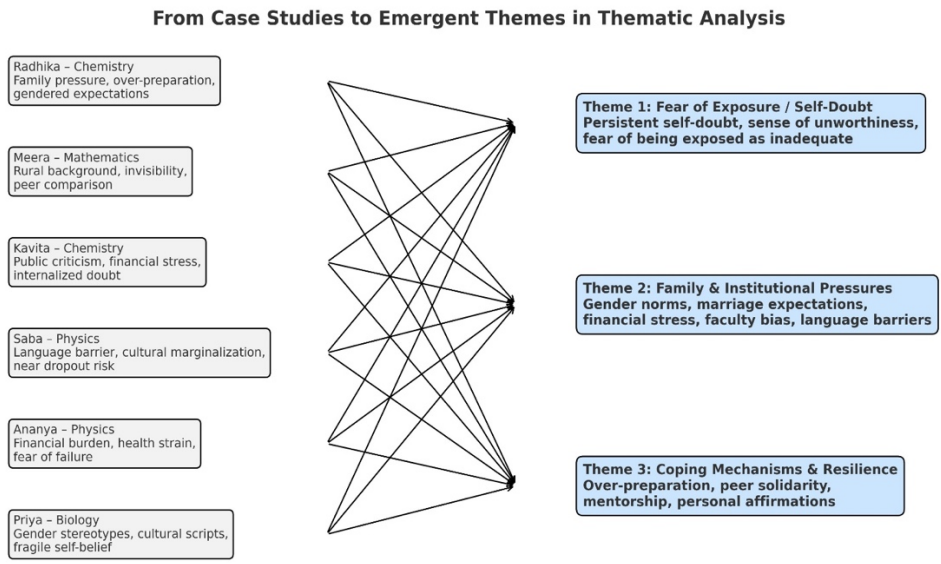

Figure 2: Thematic Analysis

Source: Primary Data

Theme 1: Fear of Exposure and the Burden of Not Belonging

A central thread running across the case studies was the fear that every achievement was undeserved and that exposure was only a matter of time. This fear was not an occasional nervousness but a lived condition—shaping how women entered classrooms, participated in seminars, and even carried themselves in the corridors of the university. It revealed the deep hold of impostor syndrome: the feeling that one is only "pretending" to be a scholar while others are genuine ones.

Radhika voiced this tension with striking clarity. She described how the weight of past praise became almost suffocating: *"Even when I score well, I don't feel happy. I feel scared that the next time I will fail, and then everyone will see I was never that good."* Her statement captures how success, instead of building confidence, intensified her fear of eventual exposure. The laboratory and seminar hall became places not of growth but of constant vigilance, as if she were waiting for her mask to slip.

For Meera, the feeling of not belonging was bound up with how she compared herself to peers from urban, English-speaking backgrounds. She admitted, *"I sit with them and feel like I am only borrowing the place, like it will be taken away when they realise I am not at their level."* Here, impostor syndrome was not simply an individual insecurity but the result of structural differences—class, language, and cultural capital—that made some students feel naturally entitled to belong while others lived as outsiders in the same space. Her reflection demonstrates how impostorism is entangled with broader sociological inequalities, not just private doubts.

The most severe expression of this fear came in Saba's story, where impostor feelings nearly ended her education. Struggling with language barriers, she recounted nights of despair: *"I packed my bag to go back home because I thought it was better to leave before they found out I couldn't manage here."* Unlike Radhika and Meera, whose fears undermined their confidence, Saba's fear directly threatened her continuation in the program. Her words reveal the destructive potential of impostor syndrome when it combines with institutional silences and cultural disadvantages, making persistence itself feel like a form of imposture.

Taken together, these accounts illustrate how the fear of exposure and the burden of not belonging formed the emotional core of the women's academic journeys. Whether in subtle moments of hesitation or in crises of near-withdrawal, impostor syndrome manifested as a constant negotiation of legitimacy. It was not only about knowledge but about identity—about who is seen, who is heard, and who feels entitled to stand as a scholar. The voices of these women show that impostor feelings are not abstract psychology; they are lived, embodied experiences shaped by unequal classrooms, family pressures, and cultural hierarchies. The fear of being unmasked was thus less about individual weakness and more about surviving in a system where women constantly felt they had to prove, and re-prove, that they belonged.

Theme 2: Gender, Family, and Institutional Pressures

Impostor syndrome for many participants did not exist in isolation; it was continually fed by the intersecting pressures of gender, family expectations, and institutional cultures that seemed indifferent to their struggles. These pressures often made their academic journeys feel less like opportunities and more like negotiations, where every step carried an undertone of doubt.

Kavita described how faculty criticism was not just a professional hurdle but something that pierced through her self-worth. Struggling to hold back tears, she said, *"When they question me in front of everyone, I cannot answer… and then the thought comes that maybe I was never meant to do a PhD. I go home and cry, thinking perhaps I should stop."* What others might have dismissed as routine academic feedback, for her became a wound that confirmed her worst fears of inadequacy. The institutional culture of harshness did not toughen her—it hollowed her confidence.

For Ananya, who carried the financial responsibility of supporting her family through her fellowship, impostor syndrome was sharpened by the weight of duty. She admitted in a moment of quiet despair, *"Sometimes I feel guilty for being here. Instead of helping at home, I am spending years proving something that maybe I am not even good at."* Her words revealed how family expectations of marriage and financial contribution merged with self-doubt, creating a heavy sense that her academic pursuit was selfish rather than worthy. The impostor feeling was thus entangled with social roles, where being a daughter, a sister, and a scholar all collided painfully.

Priya's story highlighted the subtle but persistent stereotypes that shaped how she saw herself in science. She recalled an incident in the lab, pausing mid-sentence as if the memory itself was difficult: *"They told me… girls are patient, so we are better at the small details. I smiled, but inside I felt like crying, because it meant they did not see me as someone who could lead."* For her, impostor syndrome was less about failing an exam or experiment and more about inhabiting a space that continually reminded her she was "different," tolerated but not celebrated.

These narratives make clear that impostor feelings are not just inner psychological struggles but socially produced anxieties. The tears held back in laboratories, the guilt carried home, the stereotypes endured in silence—all reveal how impostor syndrome is nourished by the weight of gender, family, and institutional cultures. It is not only that women doubted themselves; it is that their environments gave them daily reasons to question their worth.

Theme 3: Coping and the Fragile Anchors of Resilience

While impostor syndrome weighed heavily on each participant, their narratives also revealed how they created fragile but meaningful ways of coping, drawing on networks of trust, mentorship, and personal strategies to resist complete collapse. These coping mechanisms did not eliminate impostor feelings, but they gave the women small anchors to hold on to in moments of despair.

For Ananya, whose financial responsibilities made every delay in research feel catastrophic, the burden was often overwhelming. She recalled, her voice shaking, *"When I think I will not meet a deadline, I feel like crying because I see my entire family's hopes breaking with me. In those nights, I read the notebook where I write every small appreciation I ever got. It doesn't erase the fear, but it keeps me breathing."* Her strategy of collecting positive feedback points to how coping often meant building private archives of validation in the absence of consistent institutional support.

Priya, too, found strength in documenting her achievements, though for her it took the form of a diary. She admitted quietly, *"When I write down what I did in the lab that day, even a small success, I feel for a moment that I am not a mistake here."* The act of writing became a way of grounding herself against the constant pull of impostor thoughts. What might seem like routine record-keeping was, for her, an act of resistance — a refusal to let self-doubt erase her efforts.

For others, peers and mentors served as lifelines. Meera described the relief of having a senior woman mathematician who reassured her, *"Don't measure your worth in their language — mathematics itself is your*

language." She admitted that she cried after that conversation, not because her doubts had disappeared, but because, for once, someone had named her struggle and placed value on her work. Similarly, Radhika found comfort in a close friend who confessed to sharing the same fears. *"When she said she also feels like a fraud, I realised I am not abnormal. We both cried together that day, and it gave me courage,"* she shared. These moments reveal how solidarity among women created safe spaces where impostorism could be voiced without shame.

Even teaching became a coping mechanism for some, especially Meera, who described how explaining concepts to undergraduate students shifted her perspective: *"When they tell me they finally understood something because of me, I feel for a little while that I really do know this subject."* These small affirmations of competence helped her endure the larger institutional settings where her confidence was routinely eroded.

What emerges from these accounts is that coping was never about conquering impostor syndrome entirely. It was about survival, about finding small acts and relationships that could momentarily silence the inner voice that said, "You do not belong here." Whether through writing, sharing tears with a peer, or receiving one affirming remark from a mentor, these women wove together fragile anchors of resilience. Their stories remind us that impostor feelings are not erased by willpower alone; they require social recognition, collective solidarity, and spaces where women can see themselves as scholars without constantly fighting to prove it.

Discussion

This study sought to uncover the lived experiences of impostor syndrome among women in STEM education at the University of Delhi, situating these narratives within the broader socio-cultural and academic contexts illuminated by existing research. The findings resonate strongly with both the Indian-specific literature and global theoretical frameworks, underlining the multilayered and intersectional nature of impostorism as a phenomenon embedded deeply in personal, institutional, and cultural matrices.

The persistent fear of exposure and self-doubt echoed the seminal psychological constructs identified by Clance and Imes (1978), with participants mirroring the original description of high-achieving women who felt fraudulent despite clear evidence of competence. The cognitive-emotional processes delineated in Self-Efficacy and Attribution theories (Bandura, 1977; Weiner, 1986) were visible in participants' repeated discounting of achievements and attribution of success to luck or external aid. This internalisation of failure expectancy is compounded in the Indian academic environment by societal and familial pressures, as revealed in the work of Panda and Das (2025) where collectivist cultural values translate family expectations into a potent trigger for impostor feelings.

Institutional factors central to Social Capital and Role Theories (Bourdieu, 1986; Merton, 1957) were explicitly manifest. Participants reported parallels with Chakraverty's (2020, 2022) findings on the impact of hierarchical and elitist academic cultures in India, where limited mentorship, public critique, and peer comparisons exacerbate feelings of professional illegitimacy. Furthermore, the Delhi narratives extend Singh and Vanka's (2024) study by illustrating early career-stage manifestations of impostorism, highlighting how the male-dominated STEM landscape and career interruptions due to family responsibilities produce under-recognition and inhibit leadership pursuits.

The intersection of language and regional disparity as a distinct axis of impostor experience was particularly notable. Banerjee et al.'s (2025) quantification of impostor prevalence among women transitioning from Hindi-medium to English-dominated universities finds exemplification in Saba's narrative in this study. This linguistic barrier functions as both a structural exclusion and a psychological impediment, magnifying self-doubt and diminishing a sense of belonging. Such findings advance literature that predominantly addresses gender and caste by incorporating linguistic diversity as a key variable shaping academic identity and confidence.

At the national policy level, this issue resonates with international

commitments like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4: Quality Education; SDG 5: Gender Equality; SDG 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure). National frameworks such as India's Science, Technology, and Innovation (STI) Policy 2020 and programs like KIRAN (DST) can only succeed if they incorporate psychological and sociological support mechanisms alongside scholarships and training. Ignoring impostor syndrome risks wasting the potential of women who have already overcome barriers to reach advanced education.

Globally, this research affirms the chilling effect articulated by Hall and Sandler (1982), underscoring the cultural and institutional perpetuation of gendered exclusion. However, it also nuances this by situating impostor experiences within India's unique socio-educational ecosystems. The nuanced description of family and societal pressures, caste and class influences, and the nexus of academic anxiety with cultural expectations adds rich, localised texture to global models of impostor psychology.

Importantly, the coping strategies documented in this study—peer solidarity, mentorship seeking, and personal affirmations—correspond with global findings on resilience but also reflect Indian cultural specificities such as collective perseverance and familial encouragement, which might serve as leverage points for institutional interventions.

This integrative discussion demonstrates that addressing impostor syndrome among women in Indian STEM will require multifaceted approaches that go beyond psychological support to include systemic reforms in mentorship, linguistic inclusivity, and family engagement. The findings illuminate potential pathways to dismantle barriers not only at the individual level but within institutional and societal frameworks, advancing equity and belonging in STEM education.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore impostor syndrome among women postgraduate and doctoral students in STEM at the Faculty of Science, University of Delhi. Through six in-depth case studies and a thematic

analysis, it became clear that impostorism is not a fleeting insecurity but a sustained experience that shapes academic journeys. The findings show that women repeatedly encounter the fear of being exposed as frauds, the weight of family and institutional pressures, and the need to constantly negotiate their legitimacy in scientific spaces. Importantly, these experiences are not simply psychological; they are embedded within broader sociological realities of gender, culture, and inequality.

By applying sociological perspectives, the study highlights how impostor syndrome is socially constructed and reproduced. It reveals that the roots of self-doubt lie in cultural expectations of marriage and caregiving, institutional practices of criticism and exclusion, and unequal access to linguistic and financial resources. The study also illustrates the fragile strategies of coping—peer solidarity, mentorship, diaries, and teaching—that women employ to survive, even as their institutions remain largely silent to their struggles.

The significance of these findings extends beyond individual lives. They carry direct implications for higher education policy, STEM retention strategies, and India's commitments to global frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals. If India aspires to strengthen its scientific workforce and achieve equity in STEM, impostor syndrome cannot be dismissed as a private weakness. It must be recognised as a structural barrier that requires systemic intervention. Mentorship programs, gender-sensitive pedagogy, inclusive academic support, timely fellowships, and national policy alignment are concrete steps that can transform impostorism from an unspoken personal battle into a collectively addressed challenge.

In conclusion, impostor syndrome among women in STEM is both a mirror and a warning: a mirror reflecting the persistence of structural inequalities in science, and a warning that without urgent attention, the goal of gender equality in education and innovation will remain elusive. The voices in this study remind us that talent is not absent, but confidence is continually eroded by the environments meant to nurture it. The task ahead, therefore, is not to ask women to prove themselves endlessly, but to build institutions

and policies that affirm their right to belong, excel, and lead in STEM without apology.

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Panjab University Research Journal (Arts)
VOL. LVI 243-262 (July-December 2025) *ISSN: 0970-5260*

Disproportionate Sufferings of Kargil War Widows: A Social Analysis

MAMTA

Abstract

It is important not only to remember the names of fallen soldiers and martyrs but also to recognize the resilience and strength of the widows who face their own battles. While the physical injuries of war are visible on the battlefield, the emotional scars endured by the families, particularly the soldiers' wives, often remain hidden. A war widow is forced to confront the profound grief of losing her husband in the brutalities of war, and the subsequent emotional and psychological toll can be immense. This research paper delves into the complex concept of war widowhood, focusing specifically on the widows of the Kargil War. It examines the distinctive challenges these women encounter, such as emotional distress, economic vulnerability, social isolation, etc. The study also investigates the significant role of soldiers' families in supporting war widows, both emotionally and physically. Additionally, the research highlights the social conditions faced by the Kargil War widows in Haryana, addressing issues like the challenges they faced in raising children, their views on remarriage, family advice, and marriage proposals. It also discusses levirate marriage (Chadar Udana), life as widows, dress codes, social restrictions, public perceptions, access to education and employment etc. By using qualitative interviews and case studies, the paper sheds light on the lived experiences of these widows, aiming to suggest improvements in support systems and inform policies that enhance social inclusion, financial security, and psychological well-being for war widows.

Keywords: War Widows, Social Impact, Marginalisation, Kargil War, Defence forces, India, Pakistan

Introduction

Each year on July 26th, Kargil Vijay Diwas is observed to commemorate India's triumph in the Kargil War. In 2024, the 25th anniversary of Operation Vijay honours the valour and sacrifices of the soldiers and officers who fought in the war. Beyond remembering the names of heroic warriors and martyrs inscribed on memorials, it is equally vital to acknowledge the resilience and achievements of the widows who faced their own battles. Every war brings devastation but also shapes leaders, both on the frontlines and at home. While commanding officers lead their troops in combat, their wives set inspiring examples for the women within their regiments. However, female solidarity often receives less recognition in historical records compared to the widely acknowledged male camaraderie (Malik, 2006).

The soldier's family often endures profound emotional distress, not from the physical injuries visible from the battlefield, but from the hidden heartaches and anxieties. They live with the constant fear that their son/husband/father/brother might be injured, killed, or may never be seen again (Kanwal, 2002). A war widow, having faced the immense grief of losing her husband in a brutal war, courageously highlights his bravery and valour while facing the world alone, all the while maintaining a positive outlook.

Objectives of the Study

The research paper aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To explore the concept of war widowhood and the associated challenges.
- To examine the role of soldiers' families in supporting war widows.
- To assess the social conditions faced by the widows of the Kargil War.

Widowhood – A Challenge in Itself

In India, widowhood often results in a diminished social status, particularly in rural communities. While the emotional trauma of losing a spouse is

profound, the situation becomes even more unbearable for widows facing financial struggles and social stigma. War widows are a distinct subgroup of widows. The phrase "war widow" is used when the prefix "war" is used with the word "widow" to give it a special meaning and terminology; women who became widows after their husbands got martyred in the line of duty during various wars and defence operations are referred to as war widows (Khana, 2002). In the context of this research paper, the term "widow" refers solely to a woman who lost her husband during the Kargil war.

Beyond the immediate loss of life, war brings additional challenges for widows, requiring significant personal and social adjustments. In India, these women often face a range of issues, including sexual violence, assault, and even murder – reflecting the broader societal mistreatment of women. For war widows, the dual burden of gender discrimination and widowhood status exacerbates their marginalization. They frequently endure emotional anguish and social exclusion, suffering not only as women but also because of their status as widows (Ramani, 2016). This combination of factors often leaves war widows vulnerable to victimization and neglect within their communities, highlighting the urgent need for social support and systemic change (Khana, 2002).

Widows face not only social stigma but also emotional and financial crises as they adjust to shifting family and social dynamics. Their grief extends beyond the personal loss of a loved one; it is intensified by a societal structure that subjects them to severe hardships and marginalization, making their lives extraordinarily challenging (Bharati, p. 15).

Kargil War Widows

In the summer of 1999, many women in their native areas felt heightened fear and anxiety as gunfire echoed from the Kargil region and war tensions surged. Through television screens, they witnessed the harrowing reality: smoking battlefields, body bags, and the anguished faces of mothers and wives, all juxtaposed against the backdrop of military heroism and triumph.

In war, true victory is elusive; only loss prevails. It brings destruction, claiming valuable resources, lives, and property. Death and suffering are inevitable, and war rarely resolves underlying issues or brings lasting peace. The soldiers who made the ultimate sacrifice left behind families engulfed in grief, their real struggle beginning only after the war ended. These families faced the harsh realities of poverty, deprivation, and isolation. For them, the battle had just begun – a fight against adverse living conditions and profound loneliness (Dwivedi, p. 120). These women and families, often overlooked, are the unsung and unseen heroes of war. Their endurance and resilience in the face of unimaginable hardship highlight a different kind of bravery, one that remains largely unrecognized in the broader narrative of war and sacrifice.

Kargil war widows hold a unique status among war widows in India, having received nationwide recognition along with local acknowledgment from their villages and districts. The government extended unprecedented benefits and compensation to them, which marked a significant departure from previous practices. Notably, Sudha Narayan Murthy, wife of then Infosys Chairman Narayan Murthy, reached out to V.P. Malik, then Chief of Army Staff, to obtain the names and addresses of soldiers captured by the Pakistani Army. Demonstrating rare compassion, she visited the families of these soldiers, offering financial assistance through the Infosys Foundation, which supports various community welfare initiatives (Malik, p. 211).

Most Kargil war widows were young and lacked formal education, making it essential to assess their social autonomy and decision-making power. These widows are often viewed primarily in their roles as daughters, wives, or mothers, bound by traditional social norms, rather than as individuals with distinct rights. Although the substantial compensation – ranging from twenty-five to thirty lakh rupees – significantly improved their financial situations, they continued to face numerous social challenges. Additional benefits included provisions such as housing or land, free education for their children, electric connections, school naming honours, free bus passes, and

solar cookers (Hatwal, 2015). However, beyond material support, it remains vital to scrutinize the social conditions these widows face and evaluate whether their newfound financial stability has translated into genuine empowerment and social inclusion.

Disproportionate Sufferings of Kargil War Widows of Haryana

The death of a husband brings profound social and emotional upheaval to a woman's life, significantly altering her circumstances and those of her family. In many societies, particularly in India, widows face harsh social conventions that often lead to their marginalization. The societal structures tend to diminish a widow's status, and the loss of her husband is viewed as an irreversible void, affecting not only her but also the broader family, especially if the husband was a martyr. Despite government initiatives offering financial support, the emotional and social challenges persist.

In Indian society, widowhood is heavily stigmatized, often symbolizing the end of personal desires and societal value. This stigma exacerbates existing inequalities, leaving widows particularly vulnerable during times of social disruption, such as war. They often face increased risks of exploitation and sexual misconduct, amplifying their suffering both during and after war (Parmar).

Following the Kargil War, the government provided substantial reparations to war widows. However, many were pressured by their in-laws into marrying a brother-in-law (*Chadar Udana*)[1] to ensure the financial support stayed within the family.[2] These remarriages brought additional challenges, as society often refused to acknowledge these unions, leading to further marginalization. Widows frequently conceal their second marriages to avoid social judgement or financial repercussions.

They might want to keep quiet about their second marriage for one of two main reasons. Firstly, many widows fear that remarriage might endanger their government pension. However, this concern is unfounded, as official policies protect their pension rights even after remarriage. Secondly, upper-caste and urban communities often look down upon the *Chadar Udana*

tradition, contributing to the social isolation of remarried widows. This disapproval forces many widows into silence, perpetuating their vulnerability and exclusion from mainstream society. These factors highlight the complex interplay between the social stigma, financial considerations, and cultural practices, which continue to shape the lives of Indian war widows.

The research paper examines the social conditions of Kargil war widows from Haryana. It analyses their age, education, household structure, and family dynamics, including changes after widowhood. The study explores their challenges in raising children, attitudes toward remarriage, family suggestions, and marriage proposals. It also addresses the practice of levirate marriage (*Chadar Udana*), life without a husband, dress codes, and social restrictions. Additionally, it investigates their participation in social events and the advice they receive regarding family matters. This comprehensive analysis sheds light on the complex social realities these widows face.

Sample Size and Methodology of the Study

Haryana, a major contributor to India's defence sector, has produced many martyrs. During Operation Vijay, a total of seventy-four soldiers from Haryana laid down their lives, out of which fourteen were unmarried, and a majority of them being married who left behind sixty widows at the time of the war.[3] The study gathered data on these widows through a comprehensive census method. A list of Kargil war widows was procured from the Directorate, Department of *Sainik and Ardh Sainik Welfare*, Panchkula, with their locations sourced from Zila Sainik Welfare Boards across districts. The findings revealed that most widows reside in rural areas spread across various districts, including Ambala, Karnal, Kurukshetra, Gurugram, Jind, Jhajjar, Panchkula, Panipat, Fatehabad, Faridabad, Bhiwani, Charkhi Dadri (District formed in 2016, earlier part of Bhiwani), Mahendragarh, Yamuna Nagar, Rewari, Rohtak, Sirsa, Sonipat, and Hisar (Yadav, 2022).

The study focuses on widows of soldiers up to the Junior Commissioned Officer (JCO) rank, as most deceased soldiers belonged to lower income groups, were less educated, lived in rural areas, and owned small landholdings. These widows face more significant challenges, making them the primary focus of the research. In contrast, officer-class widows, who are generally better educated, economically stable, and urban residents, tend to overcome their difficulties over time and were excluded from the study.

The initial sample size included fifty-four widows up to the JCO level. However, three were deceased by the time of data collection, and some could not be contacted due to address or phone number changes, reducing the sample size to thirty. These thirty widows were reached for data collection, and both personal and telephonic interviews were conducted to gather insights into their experiences and challenges. This approach ensures an in-depth understanding of the struggles faced by widows from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions for this group.

Results and Analysis of the Study

Table 1

Respondents' Distribution According to Age at Marriage

Age at Marriage (in years)	Frequency	Percentage
10-15	9	30.00
16-20	19	63.34
21-25	2	6.66
Total	**30**	**100.00**

Source: Primary Data

The above data reveals that, 30 percent of respondents were between the ages of 10 and 15 when they were married, while 63.34 percent were between the ages of 16 and 20. About 6.66 percent of the respondents were

between the ages of 21 and 25 at the time of marriage. When we combine the first two age brackets, it becomes more obvious that roughly 93.34 percent of the respondents were too young at the time of marriage.

Additionally, some were already expecting children when they received their husband's body and his belongings from the Indian Army. This highlights the significant youth and premature circumstances under which many of these marriages occurred.

Table 2

Respondents' Distribution According to Age at Widowhood

Age at Widowhood (in years)	Frequency	Percentage
15-20	5	16.67
21-25	8	26.67
26-30	9	30.00
31-35	4	13.33
36-40	4	13.33
Total	**30**	**100.00**

Source: Primary Data

According to the data mentioned above, when these respondents became war widows, 16.67 percent of them were between the ages of 15 and 20 and 26.67 percent were between 21 and 25. Only 13.33 percent of respondents were in the age range of 31 to 35 years, compared to 30 percent of respondents who were in the 26 to 30 age range. Only 13.33 percent of women were between the ages of 36 and 40 when they became widows. Combining the first two age groups reveals that nearly 43.34 percent of respondents were widowed under 25, facing profound marital loss due to war. This left them enduring lifelong social, economic, and psychological hardships, shaping their lives with enduring trauma from such an early and devastating experience.

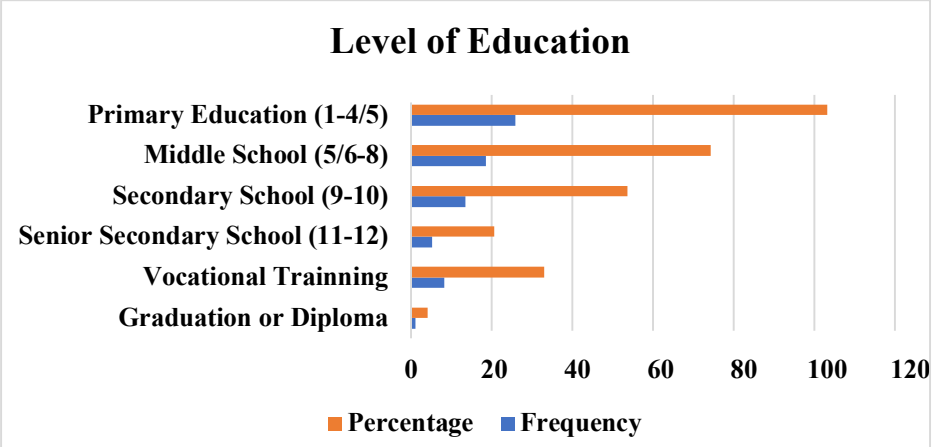

Figure 1

Respondents' Distribution Based on Level of Education

Source: Primary Data

According to the above clustered bar graph, 4 percent of respondents were graduates or had a diploma like JBT, whereas 32 percent had completed programmes that imparted vocational knowledge and training. About 20 percent of respondents reported having attended senior secondary school, while 52 percent reported having attended secondary school. Approximately 72 percent of respondents had completed middle school, with all having finished elementary education. However, their education levels fell short of the qualifications needed for most jobs, limiting employment opportunities.

This lower education level was partly due to the rural backgrounds of most martyrs from Haryana, where education standards were already lower compared to urban areas. Additionally, the sampled Kargil war martyrs, primarily JCO-level soldiers, held lower ranks, and their widows' education levels often aligned with theirs. Despite being educated, these widows faced barriers to economic independence due to insufficient qualifications for meaningful employment opportunities.

Table 3

Respondents' Distribution Based on Marital Status

Marital Status	Frequency	Percentage
Maintaining Widowhood	23	76.67
Remarried	1	3.33
Married through Chaddar Udhana (Levirate marriage)	6	20.00
Total	**30**	**100.00**

Source: Primary Data

As shown in the table, 76.67 percent of respondents opposed remarriage, citing various reasons. Some explained they already had children with their late husbands and did not wish to remarry. Others felt pride and honour in their status as war widows, valuing the bravery and respect they received after their husbands' martyrdom. About 20 percent were compelled into levirate marriages, marrying their *devars* or sometimes even married *jeths*, to keep ex-gratia and compensatory payments within the family. Only a small fraction chose to remarry, reflecting diverse personal and social pressures influencing their decisions post-war.

Table 4

Respondents' Distribution According to the Head of Family

Head of Family	Frequency	Percentage
Self	21	70.00
Mother-in-law/Father-in-law	3	10.00
Mother/Father	1	3.33
Any other	5	16.67
Total	**30**	**100.00**

Source: Primary Data

The table indicates that 70 percent of respondents independently headed their families. Contributing factors included the death of in-laws, raising

children alone, and valuing economic self-sufficiency. Around 10 percent reported that their mother-in-law or father-in-law served as family heads, making major decisions. Meanwhile, 3.33 percent stated their parents were the heads since they lived in their parental homes. Another 16.67 percent identified "others" as the family heads, including their children, brothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, or brothers.

This distribution highlights diverse family structures and the significant role widows often played in maintaining households following their husbands' deaths.

Table 5

Respondents' Distribution Based on Their Stay

Staying Relation	Frequency	Percentage
Parents	1	3.33
In-Laws	5	16.67
Children	20	66.67
Any other	4	13.33
Total	**30**	**100.00**

Source: Primary Data

The table reveals that 16.67 percent of widowed respondents lived with their in-laws, considering it a matter of honour. In contrast, 66.67 percent resided with their children or grandchildren, explaining that their in-laws had abandoned them after their husbands' deaths, forcing them to leave with their children. About 13.33 percent of widows reported living with others, such as a sister-in-law, brother-in-law, or grandchild, reflecting varied family arrangements. Notably, only one respondent, Chanda Devi, a 46-year-old from Sonipat and the widow of Shaheed Grenadier Sukhbir Singh, stated that she lived with her parents along with her child.[4]

These findings highlight the diverse living situations faced by war widows, influenced by familial support, societal expectations, and personal circumstances, often shaping their post-loss resilience and adaptation.

Table 6

Respondents' Change in Status of Relationship After Widowhood

Change in Status of Relationship After Widowhood	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	14	46.67
No	13	43.33
Can't Say	3	10.00
Total	**30**	**100.00**

Source: Primary Data

The table indicates that 43.33 percent of widowed respondents reported no change in their relationships with family members. However, 46.67 percent noted that their relationships had been negatively affected after becoming widows. Additionally, over 10 percent of respondents chose "can't say" when asked about the impact on their family relationships. Neelam Devi, a 44-year-old widow of Shaheed Lance Naik Raj Kumar from Raowladhi village, Charkhi Dadri district, shared her personal experience. She explained that her relationships deteriorated after her husband's death. Her brother-in-law exploited the ex-gratia payments and financial assistance which she received from various sources, leaving her with nothing but strained family ties.[5]

This reflects how financial and emotional challenges often impact widows' relationships, highlighting the complexity of navigating familial dynamics after loss.

Table 7

Respondents' Distribution Based on Change in Social Status

Change in Social Status After Widowhood	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	28	93.33
No	2	6.67
Total	**30**	**100.00**

Source: Primary Data

The table reveals that a significant majority – 93.33 percent of respondents – believe their social status changed dramatically after becoming widows. Many expressed that they were frightened when they became widows, aware of society's treatment of widows. However, their status improved almost overnight, and they began to be consulted on all family matters. In contrast, 6.67 percent reported no noticeable change in their social standing.

This shift highlights how widows' roles can evolve within families and communities, often bringing newfound respect or influence, though experiences vary widely based on individual circumstances. Respondents were also asked to explain their perspectives, with the trends outlined in the following table.

Table 8

Respondents' Distribution with Reasons for Change in Social Status

Reasons for Change in Social Status	Frequency	Percentage
Kargil Package enhanced the status	4	14.28
Proud to be a martyred widow	18	64.29
Status worsened	6	21.43
Total	**28**	**100.00**

Source: Primary Data

Based on the referenced data, 64.29 percent of respondents expressed pride in being widows of martyrs who sacrificed their lives defending the nation's borders. These Kargil War widows were honoured for their sacrifices and recognized as *Veer Naris*[6] by the then-government. Each year, on Independence and Republic Day, District Sainik Welfare Boards pay tribute to them. Around 14.28 percent noted that the Kargil package elevated their status within their families and society, giving them a distinct identity compared to other widows. Though their husbands' return is impossible, the financial independence provided by the Kargil package has enhanced their self-worth. However, 21.43 percent of respondents reported that their situation deteriorated after their husbands' deaths, leading to feelings of isolation and loneliness. These women lamented the loss of their social standing, attributing their honour solely to their late husbands.

Despite receiving benefits such as financial aid, employment opportunities, and access to petrol pumps or gas agencies through the Kargil package, these provisions could not fill the emotional void left by their loved ones' absence.

Table 9

Respondents' Distribution Based on Challenges in Raising Children

Challenges in Raising Children	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	7	23.33
No	21	70.00
N/A	2	6.67
Total	**30**	**100.00**

Source: Primary Data

The data reveals that 23.33 percent of respondents faced significant challenges in raising their children, as they were very young at the time of their husbands' deaths. These widows received no support from their in-laws and were left to manage both family affairs and childcare on their own. In contrast, about 70 percent of the respondents reported no difficulties in caring for their children, due to the assistance they received from their in-laws or paternal families. Some women noted that their children had grown old enough to manage tasks independently, reducing the need for additional help. A few others considered living in joint families to be a blessing, as it allowed them to handle future family responsibilities, including those related to their children, more easily. Additionally, two war widows in the sample were childless when their husbands passed away.

Table 10

Respondents' Distribution Based on Their Opinion About Remarriage

Opinion About Widow Remarriage	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	5	16.67
No	22	73.33
Can't say	3	10.00
Total	**30**	**100.00**

Source: Primary Data

The data indicates that 73.33 percent of respondents held a negative view towards remarriage. One possible reason for this could be the fact that most of the respondents were over the age of 45. Many stated that their emotional bond and loyalty to their late husband were key reasons for their decision not to remarry. Some respondents mentioned that since they had children

from their deceased spouse, they felt that the primary purpose of their marriage had already been fulfilled. As a result, they preferred to focus on raising their children rather than seeking a new partner. Concerns about their children's future were another significant factor influencing their decision to avoid remarriage. A few women expressed a fear that marrying again might lead to another tragic outcome similar to the loss of their first spouse. In contrast, 16.67 percent of respondents were open to the idea of remarriage, largely because they were still relatively young. They believed that, in a male-dominated society like India, it was difficult for a woman to live independently. Nearly 10 percent of the respondents chose not to share their opinion on the matter.

Additionally, widows were asked whether their families obligated them for remarriage. The responses they provided on this issue are presented in the table below.

Table 11

Respondents' Distribution If Their Parent-in-Laws Obligated for Levirate Marriage

Parent-in-Laws Obligating for Levirate Marriage	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	7	23.33
No	22	73.34
Can't say	1	3.33
Total	**30**	**100.00**

Source: Primary Data

The table above shows that 23.33 percent of respondents in the study revealed that their in-laws had pressured them into levirate marriage. They explained that the motivation behind this pressure was to retain financial benefits and property within the family. Monti Devi, a 40-year-old widow

of Shaheed Grenadier Surender Singh from Subana village in Jhajjar district, shared her experience. She had no children with her deceased husband, and her in-laws, including her sister-in-law, who was married to her brother-in-law, insisted that she remarry her late husband's brother, who already had children and a settled life.[7] The primary driving factor for this was financial gain. On the other hand, 73.34 percent of respondents stated that they had never been forced into levirate marriage by their in-laws. This could be due to the absence of the deceased husband's brother, the widow's grown-up children, or the older age of the widow, which made remarriage less likely. One respondent chose not to answer this question, despite repeated attempts to encourage a response.

Table 12

Respondents' Distribution on Fondness of Sought-After Symbols at Widowhood

Fondness of Sought-After Symbols at Widowhood	Frequency	Percentage
Bright Colour Clothing	8	26.67
Jewellery	17	56.67
Without the sought-after symbols	13	43.33

Source: Primary Data

Note: Since this was a multiple option question, the sum-total of frequencies is exceeding 30. However, to get the percentage score, it was divided by the total number of respondents only.

The data presented shows that 26.67 percent of respondents like wearing

bright-coloured clothing and face no social restrictions in this regard. It was found that none of the participants experienced any restrictions. The impact of social constraints, such as limitations on clothing, jewellery, or cosmetics, appears to be minimal due to greater awareness, urbanization, and a modern outlook within society. Additionally, the support provided by the army and other defence forces plays a significant role in assisting widows. Around 56.67 percent of respondents expressed a preference for jewellery, including items like bangles, bracelets, chains, earrings, and nose pins. Dolly Mehta, a 58-year-old widow from Yamuna Nagar and the wife of Shaheed Havaldar Naveen Mehta, shared her experience of finding happiness in wearing colourful clothes, jewellery, and cosmetics. She felt confident in her chat with the researcher at the expression that she solely operates her NGO, the "Ishaan Foundation," in Yamuna Nagar.[8] Her self-reliance has significantly boosted her confidence, allowing her to manage a school that provides free primary education to underprivileged children. When asked if she felt any pressure or restrictions from her family, Dolly quickly denied it, explaining that her family is progressive, open-minded, and supportive of her choices.

On the other hand, 43.33 percent of the respondents choose to live without such symbols of wealth or status, as they prefer a simpler life. They feel fortunate that their decision to live modestly is free from external pressure, emphasizing their contentment with a simple lifestyle.

Submissions

It is indeed a tragic reality that border conflicts and wars predominantly impact those left behind, especially women. While widows and families of martyred soldiers receive significant attention during wartime, they are often forgotten once the war ends, with little to no continued support. Over time, these war widows become part of the larger group of widows in society, and their specific social and economic struggles fail to garner the attention of the public or policymakers. Therefore, it is crucial for scholars, feminist activists, and policymakers in India to recognize the unique and often overlooked challenges faced by war widows.

As noted, war widows are not the only group to experience cultural trauma, but their suffering is exacerbated by the fact that they often continue to live with their deceased husband's family, which makes it more difficult for them to move on from their loss. These widows face numerous challenges, including socio-economic hardships, the uncertainty surrounding their eligibility for pensions if they remarry, and the resentment that can arise in some communities due to their receipt of state pensions.

In conclusion, it is important to recognize that studies on war widows in India remain insufficient. Indian widows, whether war widows, those living in poverty, disabled widows, or widows from various castes, form a united group that shares common cultural and emotional experiences. The socio-economic consequences of the cultural trauma tied to widowhood have not been fully examined. Additionally, personal experiences, which are crucial to understanding the depth of these issues, have yet to be adequately incorporated into academic discussions. The complex issue of war widowhood in India has been explored in this paper, but there is still much room for further research, especially through collaborative studies involving experts from history, literature, sociology, and social psychology.

Notes:

[1] A ritual chiefly in rural parts of India in which a widow was remarried to his deceased husband's brother (mainly younger brother). Although it was not a legal process, but a societal practice to look after the widow and her deceased husband's children.

[2] As stated by a respondent in the personal interview, conducted by the researcher.

[3] Data collected from the Department of *Sainik and Ardh Sainik* Welfare, Panchkula.

[4] Interview with the respondent was taken by the Researcher on 10/06/2023.

[5] Interview with the respondent was taken by the Researcher on 14/06/2023.

[6] A term used for the widow of defence personnel who has laid down his life for the defence of the country whether in war or in a military operation and whose death is attributable to the military service is called 'Veer Nari'.

[7] Interview with the respondent was taken by the Researcher on 14/06/2023.

[8] Interview with the respondent was taken by the Researcher on 09/06/2023.

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FORM-IV

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1.	Registration No.	:	ISSN 0970-5260
2.	Place of Publication	:	Panjab University, Chandigarh (India)
3.	Periodicity of its Publication	:	Biannual
4.	Publisher & Editor-in-Chief's Name	:	Rani Mehta
	Nationality	:	Indian
	Address	:	Professor
		:	Department of Sociology Panjab University, Chandigarh.
5.	Printer's Name	:	Jatinder Moudgil
	Nationality	:	Indian
	Address	:	Manager, Panjab University, Press
6.	Name and addresses of Individuals who own the Newspaper s and partners of share holders holding more than one per cent of the total capital	:	Panjab University, Chandigarh

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Printed by: Manager, Panjab University Press,
Chandigarh P.U.P. (617)-100+4P/06-01-2026

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