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Negotiating Gender: Psychosocial Challenges and Cultural Contradictions in the Indian Context

VATSALA SAXENA

Abstract

The paper is anchored in a psychosocial framework, which views the psyche and the social in a continuum—the internal landscape being constituted by external events, and the external being sustained by internal desires and anxieties. It also acknowledges how one's subjectivity is informed by the unconscious- the excess which might not find acceptance and expression in the overt. A gendered lens is extended to the cultural orientations of the Euro-American West and India. It argues that Western modernity—shaped by capitalism and industrialization—privileges masculine ideals of autonomy, objectivity, and material progress, whereas Indian philosophy, with its emphasis on relationality and contextual embeddedness, embodies a more feminine orientation. The paper further highlights the postcolonial tension between resisting Western influence—a reminder of colonial subjugation—and simultaneously aspiring to transcend this past by competing with the West on the so-called 'developmental' index. Yet, the very notion of 'development' is grounded in individualistic aspirations that risk undermining communal bonds and fostering a sense of alienation. This cultural conflict often permeates the individual psyche, leading to the 'disavowal' and 'abjection' of the feminine dimensions of subjectivity that resonate with Indian cultural orientations. This rejection often leads to adopting a compulsive masculinity. The resulting compulsive turn towards masculinity carries significant psychological costs: at the individual level, it forecloses the capacity to embrace vulnerability and seek the safety of emotional connections with others, while at the cultural level, it fosters a pervasive sense of devaluation and inferiority.

Keywords: gender, psychosocial, cultural conflict, post-colonial modernity

The paper seeks to examine the ‘gendered subjectivity’ in men and women within the Indian context, taking into account the colonial past and the imperatives of modernity. It extends the notions of the masculine and feminine beyond individual traits to a cultural level, theorizing Indian culture as having a ‘feminine’ core—defined by relationality and contextuality. The paper explores how meaning-making of gender at an individual level leads to a conflicted self towards the aspirational masculine ideals of colonialism and modernity at a cultural level. It proposes that on one hand, while colonial violence and modernizing pressures may cultivate a desire to internalize these masculine ideals- on the other hand, as a reminder of colonial subjugation, they may also provoke resentment and resistance. This tension is often manifested at both cultural and individual level, as the devaluation of the feminine (both culturally and psychically). These dynamics impose a significant psychological costs on individuals and compromise their cultural pride.

Since the paper seeks to articulate the intricate interrelation between individual psyche and cultural processes, and also draws on the unconscious to account for what cannot be fully explained by the observable, it begins by situating its discussion within a psychosocial framework.

For achieving this, the paper begins by drawing mainly from the work of Redman (2005) and Hollway (2006). Following this, in order to establish the feminine core of the Indian psyche- the psychosocial framework is employed to examine the development of gendered subjectivity in individuals, with emphasis on the foundational mother–child relationship. This section also undertakes a cultural comparison of the mother–child inter-subjectivity in the Indian and Western contexts. Furthermore, it contends that masculinity is often ideational, shaped primarily by broader cultural discourses rather than by immediate personal role models, whereas femininity is cultivated more intimately through the maternal relationship. This make masculinity appear as a rigid, non-negotiable cultural construction, while femininity can be experienced in all its vicissitudes, as exemplified by the maternal embodiment.

After discussing the development of gendered subjectivity at an individual level, the paper adopts a gendered lens to understand cultural ideals. It

attempts to make a gendered comparison between the binaries of traditional - modern and colonizer – colonized. Considering modernity to originally emanate from the West, Indian culture is construed as having its own version of modernity which carries the imprint of its traditions and colonial past – giving it a relational and contextual attributes.

The final section explores how there is a tension in holding contradictory aspirations at a cultural level. The desire to emulate the masculine ideals of modernity at the expense of a more feminine psychic constitution in an Indian context. As a result, men are compelled to disavow and abject the feminine aspects of their psyche to perform a rigid masculinity. Ironically, as Indian culture itself embodies a feminine core, the devaluation of the feminine represents not just a personal loss but also a cultural one. It stifles the holistic development of individuals and is likely to make one believe that Indian culture is inferior to a seemingly more progressive western-modernity.

THE PSYCHOSOCIAL LENS TO UNDERSTAND GENDERED SUBJECTIVITY

The paper attempts to explore how individuals in Indian context experience their gendered selves. How the masculine or feminine tendencies are negotiated by their gendered embodiment. The paper rejects essentialist assumptions, which situates femininity –care or relational orientation – in the women due to their biologically driven reproductive capacities. It acknowledges the role of the society in orienting her towards the feminine-nurturing tendencies- by giving her social roles and placing her in situations which requires the capacity to care. However, reducing the lived-experience to the social factors is as reductionist as is to resort to biological determinism.

Psychosocial framework avoids such determinism by conceptualizing individual (psyche) in continuum with the social. As Redman (2005) articulates, psychic terrain is organized by the external socio-material reality, just as social reality contains psychic defences. Besides, dissolving individual-social dualism, psychosocial recognizes the unconscious realm of the psyche. Often lived experiences cannot be completely understood by drawing reference to one's external social world, or the rational conscious

part of the self. This excess, which might be unspeakable, and unprocessed is often registered in the unconscious realm of the psyche. Ogden(1979) theorizes the psyche-social continuity, as mediated by the unconscious – by proposing how the aspects of the self which might be un-desirable or threatening are in unconscious fantasy ‘split- off’ and ‘projected’ into the external other (or the available social categories).

An individual’s subjectivity cannot be fully explained by observable social processes, nor is it solely shaped by the intentional, conscious self; rather, it is also constituted through registers of the unconscious. Hollway (2006) contends that social norms and obligations do not have a linear effect on the psyche of an individual. Contrary to the progressive assumption, that by redefining gender roles in society one could have fathers develop the same capacity to care as mothers, Hollway (2006) asserts that such capacity is shaped by deeper relational and psychological factors. One of which is the relational dynamics between the parents. Drawing on Target and Fonagy (2002), Hollway (2006) suggests that the father becomes available to the child primarily through the mother’s mind, as she tacitly mediates and introduces the paternal during the early stages of development. Consequently, the maternal not only embodies the capacity to care but also bears the responsibility of enabling the father’s participation in this role, even amidst changing gender norms. Further, it is not just horizontal but also vertical inter-generational relations that contribute to one’s subjectivity. It is not limited to the parents’ relational dynamics but also extends to their identifications with their own parents, which shape the parents’ gendered subjectivity and in turn trickle down to the child. Further, the child’s own fantasy world makes this picture further complex. Benjamin (1995) describes the ‘fantasy father hero,’ who represents the external world, freedom, and excitement—even if the father in everyday life occupies a caregiving function. Lastly, the maternal capacity to care also stems from the mother’s early embodied experience of carrying the baby, which continues to inform her later relation with the child. Thus, despite the redefinition of social roles and the progressive mind-set of people, the psyche is not simply malleable to external changes, and is constituted by multiple unconscious registers.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE GENDERED SUBJECTIVITY IN THE MOTHER-CHILD BOND

This section employs a psychosocial framework to examine the development of gendered subjectivity within the mother-child dyad. It compares the ‘separation-individuation’ process in girls and boys, while also highlighting how this process unfolds differently in the Indian context compared to the West. The discussion suggests that masculinity—particularly in the absence of an emotionally available father—may be more ideational, shaped by dominant cultural imaginaries that serve to uphold the status quo. In contrast, femininity, emerging through the intimate and embodied relationship with the mother, appears more responsive and malleable to the contingencies of life. This section further explores the psychic tensions that arise from these relational dynamics, particularly those that contribute to the devaluation of the feminine. This devaluation at psychic level has a particular significance in Indian context as it insidiously causes one to undermine the overarching relational –collectivist cultural ethos.

Chodorow (1994) builds on Fairbairn and Mahler’s concept of the ‘infantile dependency’ and ‘separation-individuation’ for emphasizing on the foundational role of the child's relationship with the primary caregiver—most often the mother, and almost always a woman—in the early years of life (Fairbairn, 1952; Mahler & Furber, 1968). Consequently, the primary identification for children of all the sexes is with a woman. This identification is established before the ‘separation-individuation’ stage, where the child considers the primary caregiver as an extension of himself/herself. However, the process of achieving separation-individuation is different for both girls and boys. Since the mother (over) identifies with her daughter, the daughter finds it difficult to achieve individuation from the mother. While, on the other hand, according to Chodorow (1994) the mother emphasizes the son’s masculinity and views him as fundamentally different from herself. It is almost as if the son is hurried into achieving separation from the primary object of identification. However, even after the rushed and inevitable separation-individuation, it is not easy for the son to acquire a coherent sense of masculine identity.

This is partly because, in the domestic realm where the young boy spends most of his time, the father is often emotionally or physically absent. Without a present and nurturing paternal figure to support this transition, the son constructs an idealized or fantasized version of masculinity. In his pursuit to form a coherent masculine identity, the son frequently relies on ‘negative identification’—defining himself in opposition to the feminine. Anything that is ‘not feminine’ becomes, by default, coded as masculine. Internally, this often involves rejecting his early attachment to the mother and disavowing any qualities deemed feminine within himself. This psychic process frequently culminates in the devaluation or degradation of femininity more broadly.

A similar devaluation of the ‘feminine’ characterized by the ‘capacity to care’, is theorized by Hollway (2006). She argues that a child up to two years does not self-consciously establish their gender. Borrowing from Fast (1984) and Benjamin (1995), she explains that the child at this age is ‘over inclusive’- he/she believes that they can be and have everything. For example, a boy may imagine himself carrying a child or nursing a baby, just like his mother. At this point, he has not yet experienced the feeling of loss that comes with the realization of biological limitations. The boy copes with this feeling of loss of potentiality either by ‘repudiation’ or ‘renunciation’ of the mother- his object of primary identification (Benjamin, 1995). In the case of repudiation, he splits the feminine and the masculine, rejecting the former—now seen as unattainable—and subsequently devalues it. Alternatively, through renunciation, he may thoughtfully relinquish those aspects of femininity he cannot attain (such as birthing), while still incorporating other attainable aspects of the feminine alongside his developing masculinity. The possibility of this healthier integration through renunciation is facilitated by the father’s emotional availability and participation in caregiving. However, considering that the latter scenario is less commonly observed, boys are often at risk of rejecting the feminine within themselves.

Unlike Chodorow (1994) and Hollway (2006), who argue that boys typically reject their psychic association with their mothers—and consequently the feminine aspects within themselves—Kakar (2012)

emphasizes a relatively feminine psychic orientation among Indian boys. As they grow, however, the patriarchal demands of society often generate a tension between their maternal- feminine stance toward the world and the societal valorisation of masculinity. This tension remains largely unresolved. Yet, as Kakar (2012) notes that clinical observations suggest, Indian men are often more at ease with the feminine dimensions of their personality and are generally less homophobic than their Western counterparts. This suggests a psychic acceptance of the feminine that is not always mirrored in the social world—a disjuncture that reveals the inner/outer split men must navigate.

According to Kakar (2012), in contrast to Chodrow's (1994) conceptualization wherein boys are almost rushed to achieve separation-individuation from the mother, Indian boys have a prolonged infancy. Indian mothers are deeply invested in their sons, as sons bring them social prestige and establish their identity as an adult woman, before which they are either treated as guests in their maternal house, or a daughter-in law having the lowest regard in the marital household. The son is often seen as a saviour for the mother, and the mother attends to all needs of the son, much beyond the western prescriptions. The son is often breastfed till two-three years, and there is no rush to toilet train the child. The mother follows the child's pace and is perceptive to his readiness. There is a greater physical proximity between the mother-son in India compared to western counterpart, as brought about by prolonged breastfeeding, co-sleeping, and daily ministrations. This ever-presence and responsiveness of the mother to the son's needs construes her as the 'good - mother' in the male psyche. Though not farther away is the idea of a 'bad mother' who demands role reversal, and sees the son as an object of her desires. However, the male consciousness is dominated by the construction of a 'good mother'. The duration and intensity of the maternal responsiveness constitute a feminine core of the Indian male.

Thus, drawing from the work of Chodorow (1994), Hollway (2006) and Kakar(2012) , it can be concluded that Indian men have a relatively feminine orientation in comparison to their western counterparts- largely due to mother's overwhelming presence and son's prolonged dependency.

It can also be proposed that men in both the context struggle to have a secure, coherent masculine identity, primarily because of the emotional absence of a singular, prominent paternal figure. As a result, boys often construct a fantasized, rigid version of masculinity shaped less by relational bonds and more by construed cultural expectations. This process typically fosters a devaluation of the feminine—both within themselves and in others. While such devaluation may be observable across many parts of the world, it assumes a particularly acute form in the Indian context. Here, it generates a crisis by threatening to rupture from indigenous social practices and values that have historically celebrated community living, sustained through mutual care and interdependence – attributes which have been conventionally characterised as feminine.

A GENDERED LENS TO CULTURE: BEYOND INDIVIDUAL

The previous section examined gendered subjectivity at the level of the individual psyche. This section shifts focus to the socio-cultural level, adopting a gendered lens to explore cultural orientations. It proposes that Indian culture exhibits a relatively feminine orientation in contrast to the more masculine orientation of the West. In psychological and feminist literature, the feminine is often associated with flexible ego boundaries, which foster a subjectivity that is relational, emotionally attuned, and contextually embedded (Chodorow, 1994; Gilligan, 1982; Benjamin, 1995). In contrast, hegemonic masculinity is built upon values such as individualism, autonomy, control, and competitiveness (Connell, 1995). The masculine ideals reinforced in the west may be attributed to their historical positioning as the origin of modernity and the driver of colonial expansion. While, the West experienced modernity as an internal development, India and other parts of the Global South encountered it through colonization. Yet, rather than fully assimilating into the dominant masculine ideals of western-modernity, these societies often resisted and reinterpreted them, thereby retaining more relational and collectivist cultural forms. Giddens' (1991) concept of 'reflexive modernity' and Nandy's (1988) critique of colonialism as an oppressive assertion of Western supremacy highlight the masculine characteristics associated with the West. In contrast, Kakar's (2006, 2012) and Ramanujan's (1989)

emphasis on relationality and contextual embeddedness within Indian philosophy underscores Indian culture's more feminine orientation.

Giddens (1991) 'reflexive modernity' is primarily characterized by emphasis on increased productivity, individualization and de-traditionalization. According to Giddens (1991), the modern individual constructs his/her 'self-identity' by means of the biographical account of his/her success or failure of past decisions and potential of future plans. Modernization is closely tied to capitalism and neoliberalism where the primary aim is to maximize profit. It is the efficiency, productivity, and tangible output that is valued. There is a celebration of individual agency and meritocracy, which is seen as 'emancipatory'. As supposedly anyone despite their social positioning (from depressed class, women, marginalized caste) can become successful if they have the said merit. Such seemingly emancipatory outlook, disregards the contextual struggles of an individual. On one hand, as modernity primarily foregrounds individual responsibility, it is also likely to alienate him/ her from the society. Modernity tends to lead to detraditionalization, as folk understanding, or wisdom of the past generations is accorded less value, than the formal expert knowledge. The informal, relational ties that cushions an individual's fall tends to become less important. Institutions like family, religion, community or state seemingly have less prominence in an individual's life. Thus modernity is characterized by rationality, productivity, and individualization, as against emotions, process orientation and relationality. The former triad is posited as 'masculine', while the later as 'feminine' traits.

Nandy (1988) in his book, *Intimate enemy*, further emphasizes West's masculine orientation, as he writes about the experience of colonization for both colonizers and colonized. He emphasizes that colonization is not defined by political or economic exploitation, but is a state of mind. The actual colonization began when the middle class evangelical British adopted a reformist orientation. They presumed a sense of supremacy and considered the Indians as inferior. According to Nandy (1988) the colonizers had masculine quality, as they legitimized aggressiveness and domination. Against the backdrop of industrial-modernity, they had technological supremacy, advocated for tangible productivity, and were

ruthless consumers. While Indians were construed as feminine, as they were seen to be passive and subjugated. Indians were further considered to be infantile and primitive, who needed colonizers to develop them into young, masculine adults.

East Asian cultures, including India, are often characterized as collectivist—valuing interdependence, social harmony, and a contextualized worldview over autonomy and individual free will (Nisbett, 2003). This context sensitivity is evident not only in proximal domains such as child-rearing practices but also in the broader philosophical traditions of India. Unlike in more individualistic cultures, child development in India is not traditionally governed strictly by objective structural milestones. For example, Indian mothers typically do not rush their children to meet standardized developmental goals, instead respond more intuitively to the child's pace and context. Indian subjectivity may be marked by a more permeable self–other boundary, which often fosters warmth and relational closeness—though it may also be perceived by outsiders as overly involved or intrusive.

Kakar (2006) writes about the three guiding principles of Hindu worldview: moksha dharma, and karma. *Dharma*, as he writes, means to abide by one's duty, a sense of right and wrong. The principle of Dharma is based on 'relative ethics'. It is highly contextualized, as it depends upon one's social positioning (caste, gender, age, relation), time period, location, and innate character (*gunas*) inherited from previous life. Thus in a practical life, there is no way to know with absolute certainty the right thing to do, as we shall never have the full contextual information. In other words, there will always be different 'right' ways of doing the same thing, as the context will never be the same. According to relative ethics of dharma, the same deed committed by people of different castes will fetch differential punishment or reward. Further, since there is no 'one' right way of doing things, this uncertainty gives Indians a tolerance for ambiguity, and flexibility in decision making. Kakar (2006) cites Shweder and Bourne's (1984) work to further highlight the context sensitivity of the Indians. In their study they compare Indians' and Americans' description of people. While Americans' gave an abstract generic description like 'nice', 'good', the Indians gave a

more particular and contextualized descriptions like ‘he brings sweets’ or ‘he helps me’.

This contextual embeddedness is evident across multiple domains of Indian life. For example, according to Ayurveda - the medical science having its root in Indian sub-continent- human body is composed of the five natural elements of air, water, earth, fire and space; and not just the materiality of flesh, bone, blood, or genetic substance. Similarly, Ramanujan (1989), in his influential essay *Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?* provides rich illustrations of this embeddedness in the Indian psyche. He describes how the organization of texts and poetry in Indian traditions is marked by the interpenetration of the individual and culture, wherein nested contexts continually infuse meaning into one another. He further notes that the *raga* in the classical music is to be sung in a particular time of the day. There is specificity in the making of the musical instrument, which is to be made by people of a certain caste, on a certain day and time, with a particular raw material, after observing certain rituals- as the instrument is said to acquire the *gunas* (characteristics) of all the above determinants. Extending this logic, the individual psyche is also thought to be influenced by external cosmic and spatial factors, such as *vaastu* (directional alignments), gemstones, and planetary positions. This fusion of the internal and the external lends Indians an intuitive, non-verbal, sensual way of thought process. According to Kakar (2012), such way of relating is called - the ‘primary process’, which is often linked to creativity and aesthetics. While westerners are predominantly said to be governed by ‘secondary processes’, which are more structured, verbal and rule based. However, it is noteworthy that while Western thought is often credited with being analytical—breaking a whole into smaller parts and establishing linear cause–effect relationships—Indian thought, though more intuitive, is by no means less analytical. Rather, it demonstrates a non-linear style of synthesis: bringing parts together into meaningful wholes, repeatedly and in multiple ways, sometimes producing similar and at other times paradoxical outcomes. Yet, each seemingly paradoxical product is held in harmony with the other, rather than being seen as antithetical. This is the work of an intuitive insight not confined to the materiality of the sense organs (Sinha, 2014).

TOWARDS DESTABILIZING STATUS QUO

The final section of the paper engages with the notion of an alternative ‘post-colonial modernity’, one that diverges from the dominant model of ‘European modernity’. Post-colonial modernity has been termed as a ‘petit modernity’—a derivative, exported version of the so-called ‘grand’ European modernity, which is anchored in ideals of progress, capitalism, and individual autonomy (Enwezor, 2010). This characterization produces a hierarchical framing wherein European modernity is perceived as normative and superior, while post-colonial modernity is rendered as secondary and imitative. However, the paper argues against this hierarchy by asserting that post-colonial modernity in Indian context possesses a distinct ontology—one that is rooted in a different philosophical orientation, emphasizing relationality, cultural embeddedness, and emotional responsiveness – which may be overall more liberating and enable a holistic living.

The paper further acknowledges that embracing post-colonial modernity is fraught with tension, given the enduring legacies of colonialism and the persistence of psychological imperialism, wherein post-colonial subjects grapple with the competing imperatives of preserving indigenous traditions while simultaneously negotiating the pressures to assimilate into the aspirational framework of Western modernity. This tension is acutely registered at the level of the individual psyche. For instance, it is evident in how Indian men frequently disavow their maternal-feminine identifications—alignments that resonate more closely with indigenous cultural ideals—in order to internalize the desired masculine attributes associated with European modernity. This disavowal acquires particular significance in the Indian context, where it is shaped not only by entrenched structures of patriarchy and the frequent absence of an actively nurturing father figure, but also by the enduring impulse to break free from the historical legacies of colonial subjugation. At this point, Kristeva’s (1982) notion of ‘abjection’ becomes salient: the maternal-feminine can be understood as not merely disavowed but actively cast out as that which is contaminating or threatening—here figured as the traditional and ‘feminine’ qualities often associated with passivity and subjugation, which

serve as reminders of colonial violation. Yet, as Kristeva (1982) insists, the objected never fully disappears and returns to continually destabilize the coherence of subjectivity- there appears to be a conflicted subjectivity of the Indian subjects. Women, in contrast to men, are often positioned as custodians of cultural continuity—tasked with upholding tradition—while simultaneously being expected to enable social mobility by embodying the shifting standards of Western modernity.

This psychic conflict is not unique to colonized subjects only, but impacted the colonizers too. Scholars like Nandy (1988) and Narayanan (2023) challenge the supremacy of European-modernity. In his book, 'Intimate Enemy', Nandy (1988) emphasizes how colonization with masculine ideals was not just harmful for the colonized, but for colonizers as well. The violence outside, lead to the violence inside too. The aggression constituted the colonizers' psyche, and gained entry into their personal relations as well. Nandy (1988) gives examples of various noteworthy figure like Rudyard Kipling , Oscar Wilde, George Orwell , and Charles Andrews who experienced their childhood back home in England as oppressive - characterized by hyper masculinity and regimentation , with no room for emotional expressiveness and relational warmth.

Likewise, Narayanan (2023) critiques the western sympathetic gaze which conceives Indian women as oppressed without any (sexual) agency. She views it as 'psychological colonization', wherein the western ideals of agency are the ones that are considered superior and to be aspired for. Narayanan (2023) challenges the westernized markers of sexual agency, like overt verbal expressions of desire, western clothing, or autonomous decision making. According to her, such monolithic construction of sexual agency obscures the non-western, alternative expression of it. It is contested that the 'agency' and 'desire' are not defined by external attributes, but are a work of internalized personal meanings which an individual may give in accordance to her lived experiences and cultural expectations. Narayanan (2023) construes Indian women's sexual agency as the internal capacity to acknowledge the bodily desires and seek their expression either in reality or in fantasy. She lays emphasis on the 'relational' Indian self, contrary to the western 'atomized' self. In Indian context, agency is seen to be derived

from relationships. People carry each other in their minds—they facilitate others, and may even be restricted by the thought of the other. It comes closer to the idea of feminist psychologists such as Gilligan (1982) who has argued that agency is inherently relational, emerging through networks of care, mutual recognition, and interdependence rather than through detached autonomy.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to theorize the gendered subjectivity of Indian subjects against the backdrop of their colonized past and the present-day imperative of emulating supposedly progressive Western ideals of modernity. It argues that Indian culture carries a distinctly feminine orientation—shaped by the intimate mother–child dyad and a broader cultural philosophy that celebrates embeddedness and relationality. By contrast, Western modernity—emerging through capitalism and industrialization—has historically privileged a masculine orientation, emphasizing objectivity, autonomy, and material accumulation.

The postcolonial subject, therefore, is caught in a persistent tension: on the one hand, striving to preserve indigenous values, and on the other, feeling compelled to overcome the burden of a subjugated past and compete on equal terms with the West. This struggle often generates psychic conflict, manifesting in the disavowal and abjection of the feminine ideals that are most closely aligned with Indian cultural orientations. Yet this aspiration to embody Western masculinity comes at its own psychological cost, constraining the possibility of holistic and relational modes of living. The paper concludes that instead of attempting to rival the West within its own masculine paradigm—which only reinforces the supremacy of its ideals—postcolonial subjects might imagine an alternative paradigm of modernity—one that is more feminine and relational. Such a move would resist the compulsion to “beat the West at its own game” and instead affirm the legitimacy of other modes of being, thereby unsettling the presumed universality of Western- masculine modernity.

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Critical Discourse on Gender and WASH: A case study of India

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Abstract

Water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) systems are increasingly recognised as gendered domains shaped by structural inequalities, sociocultural norms, and political–ecological dynamics. Despite substantial global progress in expanding WASH access, gender disparities persist in burden, risks, and benefits. This paper develops a critical discourse on gender and WASH by examining global debates on water governance, gender relations, and sustainable development, while positioning India as a central empirical illustration of how scarcity, social hierarchies, and institutional gaps shape women’s lived experiences. Drawing on feminist political ecology, intersectional gender theory, and labour economics, the paper analyses how WASH responsibilities intensify women’s time poverty, restrict economic participation, and reinforce gendered vulnerabilities across the Global South. The review highlights the need for gender-transformative governance frameworks that embed women’s decision-making roles, enhance household-level water security, and challenge socio-institutional norms that reproduce inequality. The paper concludes by identifying pathways for enhancing gender-responsive WASH policy and strengthening women’s agency within water governance systems.

Keywords: Water, Sanitation, Hygiene, Gender disparities, Water governance, Water security, Gender relations

Introduction

WASH refers to Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene, three interdependent components central to public health. Although widely recognised in global

policy frameworks such as SDG 6 and Agenda 2030, gendered dimensions remain peripheral in measurement and implementation. Women face disproportionate health risks, including waterborne illnesses, menstrual hygiene inadequacies, and exposure to contaminants (Bouzid et al., 2018; Graham et al., 2016). Additionally, due to socio-cultural norms, women prioritise water for domestic use while men allocate water for livestock and farming (UNEP, 2016). International discourse increasingly recognises the need for gender-responsive WASH design (UN Women, 2018).

Water insecurity has become one of the most urgent development challenges as populations increase, climate variability intensifies, and global demand for freshwater outpaces supply. Regions of the Global South particularly South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa bear the greatest burden, with millions experiencing daily deficits in safe water, sanitation, and hygiene access (UNICEF & WHO, 2019). India exemplifies this paradox acutely: despite being home to the world's largest population, the country possesses just 4% of global freshwater resources and experiences escalating climate-linked stress, erratic rainfall, droughts, and groundwater depletion (Krishnan, 2021). These conditions impose severe constraints on water availability, disproportionately affecting women and girls, who remain the primary managers and providers of household water and sanitation.

Across diverse contexts, gender norms assign women responsibility for water collection, treatment, and hygiene, making WASH inseparable from women's unpaid labour, physical wellbeing, and safety. Long-standing feminist scholarship highlights how water governance, though framed as a technical or infrastructural domain, is deeply social, gendered, and political (Agarwal, 2018; Kulkarni, 2011). Yet despite decades of global recognition from the 1977 Mar del Plata conference to SDG 6—gender remains insufficiently integrated into WASH policy design, measurement, and governance structures (UN Women, 2018). Empirical data reveal that women's extensive engagement with water-related domestic labour restricts their educational opportunities, economic participation, and autonomy, generating cumulative forms of “time poverty” that reinforce labour market inequalities (Asian Development Bank, 2015). Inadequate access to clean water exposes women to health hazards, musculoskeletal

disorders, and psychosocial stress. Moreover, long walks to remote water sources increase the risk of gender-based violence, including harassment and assault (Kayser et al., 2019; Pommells et al., 2018). Poor sanitation further increases vulnerability, especially where open defecation remains prevalent (Saleem et al., 2019). Girls' education is hindered by the lack of menstrual hygiene facilities, leading to school absenteeism (Vashisht et al., 2018). Water-related time poverty reduces women's capacity for paid work, skilling, and entrepreneurship. Empirical correlations show that regions where women spend more time on water management have lower female-to-male labour force participation ratios (Chattopadhyay & Chowdhury, 2022). Gendered demand segmentation pushes women into low-paying, vulnerable employment, casual labour, unpaid family work, and informal sectors (Kapsos et al., 2014). Wage gaps further widen due to limited bargaining power and employer bias (Goldin, 2015). Water scarcity thus shapes economic inequality through multiple pathways. Overall, the gendered dimensions of WASH highlight how access, labour, safety, and health are deeply intertwined with systemic gender inequalities. These burdens reinforce broader patterns of exclusion, marginalization, and socio-economic disadvantage, making gender-sensitive WASH interventions essential for sustainable development, public health, and gender justice.

This paper develops a theoretical discussion on gender and WASH by combining global ideas with evidence from India. India serves as an important case because its water crisis is large and deeply shaped by gender norms, caste inequalities, and rural–urban gaps that influence who gets access to water and sanitation. By connecting international frameworks with India-specific findings such as how women spend their time, how water affects their work opportunities, and how policies are implemented the paper provides a comprehensive view of how gender inequalities in WASH are linked to wider development challenges.

Theoretical Framework: Gender, Power, and the Waterscape

Feminist Political Ecology and Water Governance

Feminist political ecology offers a critical framework for understanding how water systems are embedded in broader structures of power,

environmental change, and social relations. Rather than viewing water as a neutral or purely physical resource, scholars conceptualise it as a “waterscape”—a socio-natural arena shaped by historical processes, institutional arrangements, and cultural norms that determine who performs water-related labour, who exercises authority over water resources, and who is exposed to risk (Harcourt & Nelson, 2015). Within this landscape, women typically shoulder the heaviest responsibilities for water provisioning, managing tasks such as fetching, storing, and ensuring water safety, yet they remain largely absent from formal governance spaces where decisions about allocation, infrastructure, and resource management are made (Sandys, 2005). Feminist political ecology underscores that these unequal burdens arise from the gendered division of labour, wherein domestic water management is feminised across most societies, and from inequitable systems of access and control that allow women daily use of water without granting them entitlements or decision-making authority. Climate variability and water scarcity further exacerbate these inequalities by intensifying women’s physical and emotional labour while reinforcing their dependence on unreliable or unsafe water sources. Additionally, cultural norms related to caste, purity, and female mobility dictate who is permitted to fetch water, from which sources, and at what social cost, thereby embedding water access within hierarchical social structures. Taken together, these dynamics demonstrate why technical interventions such as infrastructure upgrades or increased supply do not automatically yield equitable outcomes; without addressing the underlying social and institutional norms that shape water relations, gender disparities within WASH systems remain deeply entrenched.

Intersectionality and WASH Inequalities

Intersectionality offers an essential lens for understanding gendered inequalities in WASH by showing how gender interacts with caste, class, age, ethnicity, and geography to shape different levels of vulnerability (Crenshaw, 1991). Although water collection is commonly perceived as a “woman’s responsibility,” not all women experience this burden in the same way. Rural women often walk long distances to fetch water, while many urban women especially those living in informal settlements spend

long hours queuing at community taps or managing irregular water supply schedules. Caste also plays a decisive role: upper-caste women may be restricted by norms of purity and mobility, while Dalit and Adivasi women frequently face discrimination at shared water sources or are forced to rely on segregated, unsafe points. Age further influences vulnerability, with elderly women and young girls carrying heavy physical and social burdens during periods of scarcity (Singh, 2006). Poor women, migrant families, and those living in slums face the most severe risks, including exposure to unsafe water routes, contamination, absence of toilets, and inadequate menstrual hygiene facilities. These conditions heighten their susceptibility to illness, harassment, gender-based violence, and broader forms of social exclusion (Kayser et al., 2019). Intersectional analysis therefore reveals that gendered WASH burdens are not uniform; they are shaped by overlapping social identities and structural inequalities that determine whose health, safety, and dignity are most compromised.

Labour Economics and the Concept of Time Poverty

Time poverty serves as an essential conceptual link between gendered WASH responsibilities and broader patterns of economic inequality. The term refers to the chronic shortage of discretionary time that occurs when women spend large portions of their day managing water—walking long distances to fetch it, waiting in queues at unreliable public taps, storing and treating it, and performing sanitation-related household tasks. These daily demands significantly reduce the time available for education, rest, skill-building, or participation in paid employment (Becker, 1965; Asian Development Bank, 2015). Feminist labour economists argue that such time constraints restrict women's ability to pursue full-time, stable, or higher-paying jobs, pushing them instead into informal, flexible, and low-wage sectors that accommodate their domestic responsibilities (Jha et al., 2020). In contrast, men who are largely exempt from intensive WASH duties are more likely to access regular, better-paid, and secure employment. As a result, WASH-related burdens not only affect household well-being but also reinforce structural labour-market inequalities by limiting women's economic choices, reducing their earning potential, and contributing to persistent gender wage gaps. Time poverty therefore reveals how

inequalities originating in the domestic sphere directly shape wider economic outcomes and social stratification.

These theoretical strands collectively frame WASH not simply as a development input but as a gendered structural condition that influences bodily autonomy, social mobility, and economic citizenship.

Global Discourse on Gender and WASH-

The global discourse on gender and WASH increasingly recognizes that water, sanitation, and hygiene are not gender-neutral developmental domains but deeply embedded within unequal social, economic, and institutional structures. Despite international commitments including the Millennium Development Goals, the Sustainable Development Goals (particularly SDG 6), and various United Nations resolutions substantial gender disparities persist in access to safely managed water and sanitation. Current global estimates indicate that nearly 30% of the world's population remains without access to safe drinking water, and over half lack adequate sanitation and hygiene facilities, with the most severe deficits concentrated in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (UNICEF & WHO, 2019; WHO & UNICEF, 2017). These disparities are not only infrastructural but reflect longstanding gendered divisions of labour, mobility constraints, and socio-cultural expectations that position women and girls as the primary providers of household water.

Empirical evidence demonstrates that women and girls perform water collection in approximately 80% of households lacking on-premises access, often undertaking multiple trips that far exceed those made by men (UNEP, 2016; UN, 2010). In Sub-Saharan Africa alone, women fetch water in 63% of households compared to just 11% of men, revealing entrenched gender hierarchies in WASH-related labour (UN, 2010). This labour consumes substantial time and energy: across 25 African countries, women collectively spend an estimated 16 million hours each day securing water limiting opportunities for education, paid employment, social participation, and rest (UNEP, 2016). The gendered allocation of water responsibilities is therefore a major contributor to global "time poverty," reducing women's ability to accumulate human capital and participate meaningfully in economic life.

These burdens are compounded by heightened risks to personal safety and bodily integrity. Long distances to water sources and poorly designed sanitation environments expose women and girls to gender-based violence, harassment, and assault, particularly in contexts where water points are isolated or sanitation facilities are shared and inadequately lit (Kayser et al., 2019; Pommells et al., 2018). Fear of violence can restrict women's mobility, limit access to opportunities, and reinforce existing inequalities within households and communities. In cases where women are unable to meet socially prescribed expectations regarding water provision, they may also face increased domestic tension or intimate partner violence, reflecting the deeply gendered nature of WASH labour.

Health impacts are similarly profound. In societies where women routinely carry 30–40 kilograms of water per trip, the physical strain contributes to musculoskeletal disorders, spinal deformation, and chronic illness (Abid et al., 2018). For women with limited nutritional intake, water collection itself can consume up to 30% of daily caloric expenditure, exacerbating fatigue and long-term health risks. Reproductive and maternal health outcomes are particularly vulnerable under conditions of water scarcity. Historical cases, such as the Aral Sea crisis, demonstrate that ecological degradation and contaminated water sources can lead to increased maternal morbidity, infertility, and pregnancy complications, with women disproportionately exposed to pollutants and toxic minerals through daily water use (Ataniyazova, 2003; International Organization for Migration, 2020).

Climate change intensifies these inequities, as droughts, floods, and erratic rainfall amplify existing gendered vulnerabilities. In many regions, male out-migration driven by environmental stress shifts the entire burden of household management—including water procurement onto women, stretching already limited time and resources. These dynamics illustrate how environmental change and social inequality intersect, making gender-responsive WASH interventions a critical dimension of climate adaptation and resilience planning.

Water insecurity also has significant implications for women's livelihoods, particularly in the agricultural sector. With women comprising over 40% of agricultural labour in Asia and nearly half in Africa, declining water

availability poses direct threats to food production, income stability, and household nutrition (Agarwal, 2018; FAO et al., 2010). Yet despite their centrality to water-dependent livelihoods, women often lack secure water rights or decision-making authority over water allocation, further marginalizing them in contexts of scarcity and mismanagement (UN WomenWatch, 2009).

At the governance level, participation gaps remain a major barrier to equitable WASH outcomes. While global evidence shows that water systems tend to be more sustainable and inclusive when women participate in governance bodies (World Bank, 1995; UNESCO, 2006), entrenched structural barriers persist. Women constitute less than 17% of the global professional water workforce, and where they are included in local committees, their participation is frequently symbolic rather than influential (Spencer et al., 2017; Benedict & Hussein, 2019). This disconnect between women's lived expertise and institutional representation limits the effectiveness, responsiveness, and long-term sustainability of WASH programmes.

Overall, the global discourse underscores that gendered WASH inequalities are not simply the outcome of inadequate infrastructure but reflect broader systems of power that shape access, responsibilities, risks, and decision-making authority. Addressing these disparities requires a shift from gender-neutral to gender-transformative approaches that recognize women as central actors in water governance, integrate gender data into programme monitoring, and work to dismantle the socio-cultural norms that perpetuate unequal burdens. As water insecurity and climate pressures intensify globally, embedding gender equity within WASH governance becomes not only a matter of social justice but an essential component of sustainable development and resilience.

India as a Critical Case Study

India represents one of the most analytically significant contexts for examining the gendered dimensions of WASH due to its demographic scale, climatic fragility, socio-cultural heterogeneity, and persistent inequalities in access to basic services. With over 1.4 billion people but only

4% of the world's freshwater resources, the country faces accelerating water stress shaped by groundwater depletion, erratic monsoon patterns, and rising temperatures (NITI Aayog, 2018; Krishnan, 2021). These pressures disproportionately affect women and girls, who remain the primary managers of domestic water and sanitation in most Indian households.

National data reveal that Indian women lose millions of collective work hours each day fetching water, particularly in rural areas where piped water access remains inconsistent (MOSPI, 2019; World Bank, 2019). These burdens limit their labour force participation, educational opportunities, and personal autonomy, thereby reinforcing structural gender inequalities. This introduction positions WASH not merely as a technical or infrastructural issue but as a deeply gendered arena shaped by power, culture, and socio-economic hierarchies.

India's water crisis is shaped by demographic pressures, climate change, infrastructural deficits, and entrenched social inequalities. Nearly one billion Indians face seasonal water scarcity, and per capita availability continues to decline (Krishnan, 2021). Rural households, in particular, depend on distant or unreliable sources, intensifying the physical and emotional burdens on women.

Gendered Burdens and Time Poverty in the Indian WASH Landscape

According to the Time Use Survey (MOSPI, 2019), women spend nearly five hours daily on unpaid domestic work compared to men's ninety minutes. Within this workload, water-related tasks; fetching, queuing, storage, purification, and coordinating household schedules around irregular water supply constitute a significant portion. These responsibilities intensify during water scarcity, forcing women to wake before dawn, walk long distances, or wait for tankers, often at the cost of rest, paid employment, or caregiving.

In households where water scarcity is acute, women and girls are often withdrawn from school to assist with domestic labour (Vashisht et al., 2018). As a result, regions where women bear heavier WASH responsibilities exhibit lower female labour force participation and wider

wage gaps. Indian women undertake a disproportionate share of unpaid domestic labour.

Rural women face acute hardships due to infrastructural deficits and seasonal scarcity. In regions such as Bundelkhand, Vidarbha, and western Rajasthan, households routinely experience water shortages lasting months, pushing women to spend several hours daily collecting water (Kulkarni, 2011; Krishnaraj, 2011). Even in urban informal settlements, intermittent water supply compels women to revolve their routines around unpredictable timings, demonstrating how infrastructural inadequacies translate into time poverty and emotional stress (Kayser et al., 2019).

Intersectionality: Caste, Class, and Rural–Urban Divides

Caste, class, religion, and local custom shape who performs water-collection labour and under what conditions. Upper-caste norms restricting women's public mobility may limit their access to community taps, but simultaneously increase their responsibilities for water management within the home. Dalit and Adivasi women often face discrimination at water sources, being denied access to wells or compelled to use inferior or distant sources (Krishnaraj, 2011; Singh, 2006). These caste-based exclusions intersect with gender norms to produce unequal health risks and heightened vulnerability.

Socio-cultural norms also restrict women's participation in water governance. While constitutional provisions mandate women's representation in Panchayati Raj institutions, their involvement in water-user associations and village committees is often nominal due to patriarchal constraints and limited decision-making power (Agarwal, 2018). As a result, WASH infrastructure planning frequently fails to reflect women's needs, such as safe access routes, menstrual hygiene facilities, or improved storage mechanisms.

Labour Market Implications: Time Poverty as Structural Constraint

WASH-related time poverty has quantifiable impacts on the labour market. Studies show that increased time spent on unpaid domestic labour correlates with lower female labour-force participation (Chattopadhyay & Chowdhury, 2022). Women with heavy water-provisioning responsibilities

have less time for paid work, skill development, or entrepreneurial activities. Consequently, they remain concentrated in informal, low-wage employment with limited upward mobility (Kapsos et al., 2014).

These constraints reinforce the gender wage gap and reduce women's bargaining power in the labour market (Goldin, 2015). They also shape intergenerational outcomes: adolescent girls frequently miss school due to inadequate sanitation facilities or the need to contribute to water collection, limiting long-term human capital accumulation (Vashisht et al., 2018). Thus, WASH burdens contribute not only to individual time poverty but also to systemic economic inequality.

Evidence linking WASH burdens to labour outcomes is compelling. A negative correlation exists between women's WASH-related domestic workload and female labour force participation across Indian states (MOSPI, 2019). Time poverty restricts women's opportunities to seek stable, formal employment, pushing them instead into vulnerable, low-paid sectors. This dynamic contributes to persistent gender wage gaps and reinforces occupational segregation (Chattopadhyay & Chowdhury, 2022).

Case Illustrations Across Indian States

Qualitative examples illustrate the complex interplay of scarcity, gender norms, and local adaptation:

- **Maharashtra (Dengamal):** Extreme shortages have produced the phenomenon of “water wives,” where men marry multiple women to distribute water-collection labour—an arrangement that exposes deep intersections between patriarchy, scarcity, and structural inequality (Sengar, 2022).
- **Odisha (Drink From Tap Mission):** Reliable piped water supply in cities like Puri has reduced women's time burden, improved health outcomes, and facilitated greater involvement in community decision-making, highlighting the gender-transformative potential of universal water access.
- **Rajasthan:** Chronic scarcity and male migration leave women as de facto household heads responsible for agriculture and water

procurement, compounding labour burdens and constraining economic autonomy (Kulkarni, 2011).

These cases underscore how water insecurity reshapes gender relations and household structures in diverse ways.

Governance Efforts and Emerging India-Specific Models

India's policy landscape includes several WASH-related initiatives with implicit or explicit gender dimensions.

The **Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM)** aims to provide household tap-water connections nationwide, reducing women's drudgery. Although gender-neutral in policy language, JJM has gender-transformative potential by directly addressing the time poverty associated with water collection.

The **Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM)** has expanded sanitation infrastructure, improving privacy and reducing risks of gender-based violence.

Other initiatives include:

- **Atal Bhujal Yojana**, promoting groundwater management with community participation and increased roles for women.
- **Women Water Champions Campaign (UNDP–MoJS, 2021)**, highlighting grassroots female leadership.
- **Panchayati Raj gender quotas**, which create structural spaces for women's participation, although effectiveness varies significantly across regions.

Despite the emergence of several progressive initiatives, women continue to be significantly underrepresented in professional water-management roles and higher-level governance structures. Deeply ingrained patriarchal norms, uneven access to technical training, and the gendered division of labour restrict their meaningful participation. As a result, gender mainstreaming within WASH governance remains inconsistent, constrained by institutional blind spots and cultural norms that limit women's voice and influence in decision-making spaces

Discussion

Findings from India reflect global patterns in which WASH labour is treated as an extension of women's traditional domestic responsibilities, reinforcing gendered hierarchies that restrict women's mobility, access to education, and personal autonomy. These responsibilities are not natural or inevitable; rather, they arise from deeply rooted social norms that assign water-related work to women while simultaneously limiting their participation in the governance structures that determine water allocation, infrastructure, and resource management (Harcourt & Nelson, 2015). The cumulative impacts of these burdens are multifaceted, ranging from physical exhaustion and musculoskeletal strain to heightened psychosocial stress, exposure to violence during water collection, and the loss of economic and educational opportunities. Together, these effects underscore how the gendered organisation of WASH work reinforces broader patterns of structural inequality.

From a political economy perspective, water governance in India mirrors the wider power asymmetries that privilege male decision-making and marginalise women's agency. Although women possess intimate, everyday knowledge of household water use, they remain significantly underrepresented in formal institutions such as water-user groups, village committees, and local governance bodies. Even when women are nominally included, their participation tends to be symbolic, with limited influence over planning, budgeting, or technical decisions (Benedict & Hussein, 2019). This disconnect between women's experiential knowledge and their restricted institutional authority undermines accountability and results in WASH systems that often fail to meet women's practical needs for accessibility, safety, and reliability. A political economy approach therefore highlights that genuine inclusion requires more than increasing numerical representation; it demands cultural change, capacity-building, and systemic recognition of women's expertise.

The link between gendered WASH burdens and labour-market inequality further illustrates the structural nature of these challenges. Time spent fetching water, queuing at public taps, or managing household sanitation directly reduces women's ability to pursue education, paid employment, or

skill development, thereby reinforcing occupational segregation and persistent gender wage gaps. As a result, WASH inequities contribute not only to household-level hardship but also to national macroeconomic outcomes by diminishing the effective labour supply of half the population (Chattopadhyay & Chowdhury, 2022). Increasing equitable water access thus becomes a labour-market intervention as much as a public health or infrastructure reform, with the potential to improve productivity and promote economic growth.

Despite recent policy advances such as Swachh Bharat Mission and Jal Jeevan Mission, current approaches remain limited by their emphasis on infrastructure without adequately addressing the socio-cultural and institutional norms that sustain gendered roles. Interventions that overlook intra-household power relations, caste-based discrimination, and unequal decision-making structures risk reproducing existing burdens rather than alleviating them. Moreover, persistent gaps in gender-disaggregated WASH data hinder the development of evidence-based strategies and limit the capacity of policymakers to address diverse and intersectional forms of vulnerability.

A transformative, gender-responsive WASH framework therefore requires a shift from technical upgrades toward structural reform. This includes recognising unpaid WASH labour as economically valuable work; integrating gender indicators into monitoring and evaluation; designing water and sanitation systems that reduce women's physical drudgery and time poverty; ensuring substantive, not tokenistic, leadership of women in water governance; and linking WASH reform with broader labour, education, and social protection policies. Such an approach aligns with global recommendations, especially those from UN Women (2018), which emphasise expanding women's capabilities, decision-making power, and bodily autonomy as essential prerequisites for equitable and sustainable WASH outcomes.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the deeply interwoven relationship between gender and WASH in the Indian context, demonstrating that water,

sanitation, and hygiene systems are not merely technical infrastructures but social institutions that shape gendered experiences, opportunities, and vulnerabilities. Across diverse regions in India, women disproportionately bear the physical, emotional, and economic burdens of WASH-related labour, which manifests as chronic time poverty and reduced life opportunities. These burdens are further compounded by caste, class, and geographic inequalities, illustrating that gendered WASH challenges are not uniform but differentiated across social hierarchies.

The analysis shows that inadequate water access, unsafe sanitation, and gender-blind governance structures restrict women's mobility, curtail their participation in community and institutional decision-making, and suppress their labour market participation. Empirical evidence from the Indian Time Use Survey highlights how extensive unpaid domestic labour—particularly water management—directly correlates with low female labour-force participation rates and persistent gender wage gaps. Such findings reveal that WASH inequities are not only public health concerns but macroeconomic issues that shape national productivity, human capital formation, and inclusive development trajectories.

Despite significant investments through flagship programmes such as Jal Jeevan Mission and Swachh Bharat Mission, the persistence of gendered burdens indicates that infrastructural expansion alone is insufficient. Without engaging with the structural norms that assign WASH responsibilities to women, technological solutions risk reproducing existing inequalities. Transformative change requires integrating gender-responsive approaches into WASH planning, implementation, and governance, including recognising women as key stakeholders, valuing unpaid domestic labour, and strengthening their leadership in water governance institutions.

As climate change intensifies water scarcity and variability, the gender–WASH nexus will become even more critical to India's development future. A sustainable path forward demands intersectional, data-driven, and gender-transformative WASH interventions that reduce women's time poverty, expand their socioeconomic opportunities, and enhance resilience

at household and community levels. Empowering women in water governance is not only a moral imperative it is a strategic necessity for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and ensuring equitable, inclusive, and resilient water futures for India.

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Collaborative Governance Through Social Innovation : Global Practices and Local Adaptations

SANJEEV KUMAR SHARMA

Abstract

Collaborative governance, in combination with social innovation, represents a powerful way to tackle difficult social problems when traditional, top-down approaches to governance fail. Collaborative governance involves diverse actors and stakeholders—government actors, non-governmental organizations, the commercial sector, and citizens—working together to co-create solutions. Collaborative governance not only draws on different voices and their knowledge, but also, more importantly, on their resources and expertise, which, if aligned, can lead to a more effective, fairer, and sustainable outcome. However, the successful implementation of collaborative governance requires contextually adaptive approaches that respond to the local realities of each situation as it is impossible to apply global models into specific local cultural, political, and socio-economic settings. Collaborative governance is a governing arrangement in which public agencies engage non-state actors in a formal, consensus-oriented process for the purpose of making or implementing public policy. Collaborative governance is more than consultation or engagement, it is about genuine shared decision-making. Social innovation, in contrast, refers to new ideas, products, or processes that address a social need and/or create new social relationships or collaborations. The combination of collaborative governance and social innovation means that social innovation is not just an outcome of collaborative governance, but also the impetus for it to occur. In fact, the goal of collaborative governance is an act of social innovation, as it creates new ways for people and organizations to work together to solve problems. This collaborative capacity creates a space where dynamic, multi-faceted creative solutions

can emerge that address "wicked problems" that might not be resolved through traditional solutions. Collaborative governance and social innovation can take many forms around the world to try and address a wide variety of social issues. In fact, in almost every part of the world, collaborative approaches are essential for natural resource management. For example, in the United States, watershed management initiatives often unify federal and state agencies, local governments, landowners, and non-profit conservation groups for the protection of water quality and habitat. These partnerships provide a much more holistic and local-informed approach compared to what any singular governmental agency may do. Through "smart cities" and co-creation labs, partners include citizens, universities, and businesses in co-designing public space, as well as services. This not only sparks more user-friendly, innovative urban solutions, but also generates civic engagement and civil trust.

Keywords: Collaborative, Governance, Social, Innovation, Global, Adaptations

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic stressed the urgency of a collaborative approach to public health. Countries, like South Korea and China, despite being politically dissimilar, succeeded in managing the outbreak by encouraging active collaboration of government health agencies, technology companies, and civil society actors.

Collaborative multi-sectoral approaches allowed for swift information sharing, widespread testing, and contact tracing with little friction, illustrating that an emergency that puts lives at risk can be the impetus for dynamic collaborative responses (Chitac, 2022).

While the principles of collaborative governance are broadly applicable, they must be adapted to local circumstances to work successfully. A significant barrier is that differences in local contexts may create challenges in regard to differences in culture around communication and decision-making.

In some cultures, hierarchical systems are entrenched, creating unfamiliarity with more open consensus-building processes. Leaders

establishing local adaptations will also need to build trust and create space for dialogue in the new context for the effort to be successful.

The degree to which non-state actors will wield influence over policy is a function of the political system in the country. In a democratic society, non-state actors may see collaborative governance integrated into the existing law; however, in a more authoritarian context, non-state actors could see collaboration at best informal and localized.

An example may be a community-based approach in a developing country that may have to circumvent or work through overlapping or inefficient government bureaucracy to achieve its objectives.

Collaborative governance often includes significant costs, whether they be financial, staffing, or in capacity. For local engagement in environments of limited resources, pragmatic local adaptations may be components of building on capacity and engaging with existing and achievable resources. For example, training community leaders, utilizing basic low-technology forms of communication, and focusing engagement on a few targeted and achievable supporting goals would be local resources. (Chenavaz, 2024)

Any method derives from promising features while oftentimes presenting potential concerns. Power, competing interests, and accountability are some aspects that might interfere with the quality of the value of this engagement.

For example, a large corporate partner will certainly have greater resources and influence than a small community group, and this may result in an unequal degree of participation in the eventual planned or modified outcome. These concerns can be minimized with a neutral facilitator and clearly defined processes of engagement.

Political will is often a decisive factor when evaluating collaborative governance, and is particularly relevant in terms of political will to commence and sustain meetings among diverse stakeholders. Political will is particularly important with leaders among government and non-state sectors willing to convene, facilitate, or even champion collaborative processes. (Carroll, 2020)

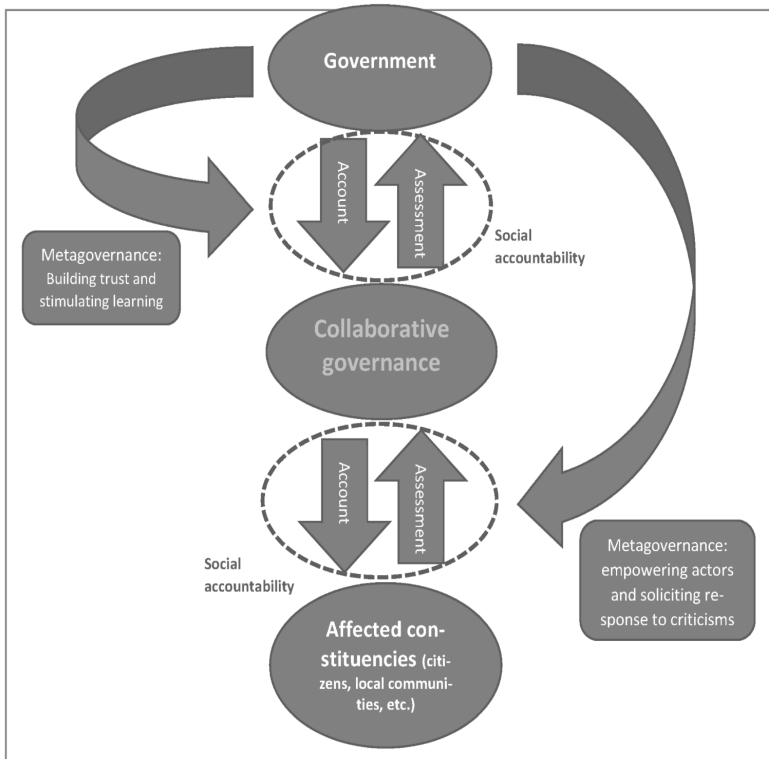


Figure 1: Collaborative governance

Source: researchgate.in

Institutional frameworks are understood as either formal or informal rules that facilitate collaborative processes. They shape the "nuts and bolts" of how groups will engage with each other, how they make decisions, and how they will generally function. Institutional frameworks can be very formalized, for example legal contracts, or much more informal, for example ground rules.

Formal structures are formal legal structures that offer the legal basis and formal organization of the collaborative undertaking. Here are some examples of formal structures or frameworks:

Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) and Inter-agency Agreements are documents that articulate the roles and responsibilities for organizations participating in collaboration, as well as represent resources for the collaborative process.

Bylaws and Operating Agreements, are rules governing the internal processes of the collaboration, for example, decision-making, meeting processes, and welcoming new members. (Scipioni, 2021)

Embedding successful collaborative models (and innovative practices) into government would lead to projects that go beyond a one-off project, further allow for public institutions to become more resilient, and responsive organizations.

Collaborative governance models are also essential for creating “smart communities” that use technology to address urban issues. For example, partnerships among government agencies, technology companies, and community residents co-design and co-deliver smart solutions for urban issues such as waste management, transportation, and public safety.

Additionally, collaborative governance between government, industry and environmental groups is essential for addressing complicated environmental problems. For example, river basin management projects may bring together many stakeholders to design and implement innovative approaches to managing floods all while restoring nature. (Evans, 2022)

Objectives:

- To study the Collaborative Governance
- To study the relation between Collaborative Governance and Social Innovation
- To study the Global Practices and Local Adaptations for Collaborative Governance and Social Innovation

Literature Review

Ansell et al. (2022): The collaborative effort will not reach its full potential if key stakeholders are not properly engaged, either because they don't have the resources, the capacity, or both, to be fully engaged. If these solutions were developed and implemented, they would have been more innovative and holistic, or more importantly, met the needs of all impacted communities. Stakeholders can also experience distrust and resentment if they do not feel the process was equitable, which can be serious impediments to successful collaboration.

(Gash et al., 2021): To reduce the negative consequences of these inequities, collaborative governance work must begin intentionally maintaining a more equitable environment. Strong, but adaptive leadership that can create a "holding environment" for equity and power sharing is very important. In ensuring equity in the stakeholder's collaborative group, leaders can intentionally invite the engagement of marginalized populations, ensure every voice is accounted for as part of the process, and help to broker any heated disagreements among stakeholder groups.

Beyers et al. (2024): Traditional, top-down governance structures are often incapable of addressing complex, interconnected issues such as climate change, poverty, and refugee crises. These 'wicked problems' require responses that are nuanced and incorporate knowledge and resources from many sectors.

Borrás et al. (2022): Collaborative governance when actors from the public sector, civil society, and academia participate in a collaborative process can facilitate pooling knowledge and developing more holistic and creative responses. The vehicle for this process is social innovation - encouraging the co-creation of a new approach beyond the limitations of one sector.

Crosby et al. (2021): Social innovation can enhance public services, making them more efficient and effective in addition to being user-friendly: Through citizens, community organizations, and frontline staff working with designers in the design and delivery of these services, their own lived experiences and insight can be incorporated into the innovation effort.

Priestley et al. (2022): Collaborative governance relies on trust and open communication amongst a variety of stakeholders. Social innovation allows for the creation and solidification of these relationships. By engaging citizens and community groups in decision-making and problem-solving activities, collaborative governance initiatives build trust with government through engaged and empowered citizens who feel they have a say in their circumstances. The pivot from a top-down, hierarchical model to a decentralized, participatory model is all part of social innovation as it relates to the public sector.

Toniolo et al. (2021): Governments are subject to strict budgets in providing

public services as well as sometimes an absence of substantial knowledge in specific areas. Relatedly, collaborative governance provides an opportunity to engage new sources of resources, be it private capital, volunteer labour, or expertise from non-gov organizations.

Research Methodology

For the current study, we collected data from secondary sources where we used previously published articles and books related to our work and some government documents were also used.

Collaborative Governance Through Social Innovation : Global Practices and Local Adaptations

Global collaboration is essential for tackling complex issues that transcend national borders, like climate change, pandemics, and economic development. These partnerships bring together diverse resources, expertise, and perspectives to achieve shared goals. The following case studies highlight successful examples of global collaboration in different sectors.

a) Healthcare: The Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI)

Parent organization Rotary International, a non-governmental - non-profit organization focused on fundraising and advocacy - provided the funding stream. Technical expertise was given largely by the WHO and CDC with scientific and technical assistance.

UNICEF served as the managing partner to orchestrate delivery and execution of polio vaccine distribution globally while also engaging in public service communication campaigns. This multifaceted approach addressed the poliovirus challenge from all possible angles: financial, scientific, and logistic.

Accomplishment: By 2024, the number of documented wild poliovirus cases has dropped by over 99.9% (from 1988), and the virus is only considered endemic in two countries (Pakistan and Afghanistan) from a total of 125 endemic countries. This example illustrates how a shared vision and coordinated effort can overcome a large global challenge.

b) Science and Technology: The International Space Station (ISS)

The ISS represents one of the most ambitious and longest running examples of multilateral cooperation in science and technology. The ISS is a habitable artificial satellite in low Earth orbit and is collaboratively funded and operated by five space agencies: NASA (United States), Roscosmos (Russia), JAXA (Japan), ESA (Europe, the European Space Agency), and CSA (the Canadian Space Agency).

Objective: The ISS acts as a microgravity and space environment research laboratory.

Waterfall of Cooperation: Each partner has provided specific modules and expertise. For example, Russia is responsible for the station's primary propulsion systems and life support systems, while the US has provided the power, and large portions of the laboratory modules.

In all cases, each module was built in a different country and brought to assembly in space. The cooperation and assembly of the modules in space required an unprecedented level of operating standardization and interoperability to guarantee that all of the components fit and functioned together without any problems.

Outcomes: Since 2000, ISS has been continuously occupied with a history of delivery for thousands of scientific experiments and contributed to human knowledge in a multitude of scientific areas, from human physiology to material science.

c) Business: The Renault-Nissan-Mitsubishi Alliance

The Renault-Nissan-Mitsubishi Alliance is a long-term cross-cultural alliance in the automotive industry. This is a strategic alliance -- not a merger -- but is aimed at maximizing synergies and achieving economies of scale.

Discussion

While it is regularly extolled for potentially stimulating innovation and better results, its success is heavily influenced by the surrounding cultural context in which it is situated. Culture, involving values, beliefs, norms, and communication styles we share, can open to collaboration or create

significant obstacles; therefore, understanding the cultural context is key to any effective collaboration.

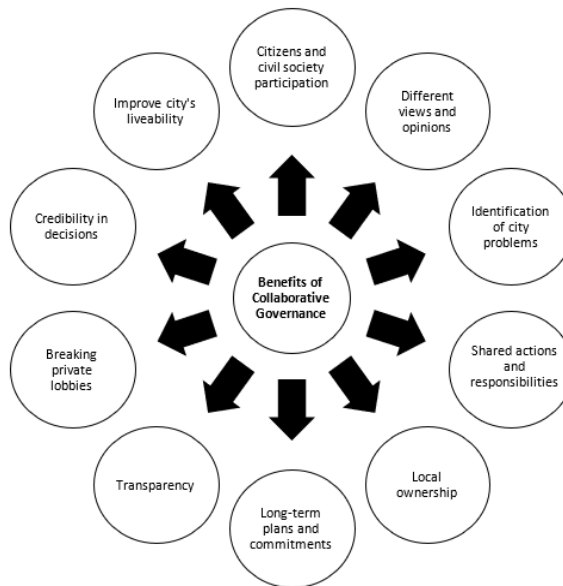


Figure 2: Collaborative governance benefits

Source: researchgate.in

Communication and conflict resolution styles may be the most overt aspect of cultural influence in a collaborative situation. What might be viewed as polite or persuasive in one culture may be considered rude or ineffective in another.

High-context cultures, which convey much meaning non-verbally and through shared understanding, are likely to grapple with low-context cultures, which rely on explicit verbal communication. Similarly, addressing conflict directly, using a mediator, avoidance, or other strategies are rooted in the culture in which a person is raised.

A collaborative group that does not recognize these differences may become mired in miscommunication, unresolved tensions, and perhaps an inability to discuss the matter entirely. Engaging flexibly with different communication styles and developing culturally responsive forms of dealing with disagreements is critical to sustaining momentum and creating shared goals.

Collaborative governance is not a culturally neutral enterprise, and its actualization relies on an in-depth understanding of the culture in which it is enacted. Culture serves as an overarching variable that guides foundational values, social norms, expectations related to power, trust-building, approaches to communication, and conflict engagement. Culture exerts significant as well as implicit force.

While the potential for collaborative governance to create innovative solutions and increase stakeholder engagement is substantial, collaborative efforts are often constrained by significant complications and community capacities in each of the partners.

The complications may create power dynamics and contribute to the effectiveness and equity of a collaboration. Large companies or well-resourced public agencies often have considerably more financial capital contributions to a collaboration than smaller non-profits or community organizations. This factors into who may have a louder voice and the type of initiatives that may be prioritized. The lack of financial capital can also be a significant barrier to implementing collaborative governance in some sectors. Other community partners may have their own staff that has specific knowledge and experience related to a policy or issue area.

Findings of the study

Inequalities in access to information and technology can pose obstacles to communication and creating opportunities to share data. For example, while organizations can come together and collectively explore a forum-based partnership, an organization on a more advanced platform with data systems and analytics can have a significant advantage, creating possible barriers towards creating a true partnership, as the access to information within the organizations is asymmetrical and could be difficult to navigate.

It is critical to recognize that government organizations, by their nature, come with formal authority and political legitimacy that other stakeholders do not. This could create a dynamic where decision-making power lies in government representatives even if the process of collaboration was modeled on a basis of consensus.

When it comes to establishing a variety of stakeholders, that process is a challenging endeavor. Issues can occur such as miscommunication, a shared

language about the topic, or a shared understanding of a difficult issue.

Additionally, there could be difficulties in coordinating the contributions of different participants that arise from different organizations, cultures, priorities, and working styles. To find an agreed path forward with many players with varied or competing interests can be time-consuming or even lead to an inability to find a path forward.

In the same light, creating collaborative systems can lead to ambiguity around ownership of the outcome, or who is accountable for the outcome. Most stakeholders adopt accountability to their own organization, which sometimes creates confusion for the collective accountability of the collaborative.

Conclusion

Social innovation is inherently a risky process with uncertainty. When you add collaborative governance on top of social innovation, the situation becomes much more complex, especially when trying to take a new idea to practice. And, at best, achieving funds to pursue social innovation is generally difficult. While the capacity to spread an innovation from a pilot project into a full blown program is required, the institutional and political landscape does not readily conform to an optimistic piloting or innovation strategy. The result is what has been labeled, "pilotitis," where small-scale initiatives do little in the way of creating social system change.

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Society & Sacrality: Exploring religion-society interactions in Gupta Age

ARINDAM CHATURVEDI

Abstract

Religious principles, through channels of social sanction and mytho-cultural elements, invariably guided predominant social tendencies in a particular space-time context. Their study enables greater comprehension of the epoch concerned, and subsequently derive socio-historically more informed inferences. While myriad studies exist on society and religion of the Gupta Age, synergy between the two conceptual constructs remains obscured. Standard indological practice assigns the two segregated explanatory columns. However, such a methodological approach suffers from both anachronism and ahistorical proclivities, as religion-society enjoyed inextricable proximity in Ancient India. In this paper, we endeavor to unveil complex interaction between religion-society ostensibly apparent through enumeration of relevant variables. This contextual entanglement would help us explore not only the mutually influencing roles of religious traditions and societal processes over one another, but also open new avenues of historical analysis.

Keywords: Gupta Age, Varṇa, Great-little traditions, Brāhmanic ritual-order, Networks, Social embeddedness, Cultural imperialism, Sacrality.

Introduction & Methodology: *Setting-up the operative base*

Discursive interactions between religion and society are generally studied from a Durkheimian perspective, which divides societal structure into two mutually entangled parts- *sacred* and *profane*, separated by a fine veil of illusionary differentiationⁱ. This method of inquiry, though considered revolutionary in its initial days, suffers from certain grave neglects- 1) it was based on the viewpoint recorded by missionaries sent to ‘convert’

Australian aborigines to Christianity, which naturally caused them to report their activities with distortions and disinterest. Relying on such callously sketched ethnographical reports, and further drawing inferences from them was an error of the first-order. 2) The principled application of the bi-modal structure of Durkheimian theory holds true only upto an aggregative macro-level, whereas on microscopic investigation, one may find it as relatively unwholesome instrument of operation, especially whilst trying to understand interconnection between religion and society, especially in an Indic context.

In an Indic religio-cultural milieu, Durkheimian sense could not be more far way from truth, as firstly, it is impossible to perfectly segregate dominions of society and religion, since both are tightly enmeshed into one another. Secondly, even profane can have sacred dimensions; for e.g. by Durkheimian standards, political machinations come under the category of profane, yet religion and its symbols play a key role in not just establishing authority, but in constantly infusing vitality within it. Moreover, performance of some elaborate rituals necessarily has economic considerations, which again hail from profane aspects of societal organization. Thirdly, while Durkheim tangentially referred to issues of ethics and morality in religion, it did not factor-in considerations such as norms, values and beliefs, along with their structural differentiation at differing levels of society (tribal, urban, peasant etc.). Fourthly, one way religion immediately connects with society is through collective organization of persons, i.e. the priestly class, who does not get any attention in Durkheimian theory. Indian History has seen continued and invariably attested presence of a dedicated and distinct priestly-class in the form of Brāhmanical communities, whose actions and deliberations played a critical role in affecting outlines of religion, albeit not as a solely defining one, as some have claimed.

In the opinion of B. Malinowskiⁱⁱ religion provides certain functional prowess which act as ‘tools of survival, mechanisms of resilience, springs of action, narratives of counselling, and construes a mythic dimension to the socio-cultural viewpoint that permeates essence of everything, whether sentient or inanimate’ⁱⁱⁱ. Parsons (1902-1979) considered religion as part of the ‘social system’^{iv}, where the presence of religion in societal structures

helps in meaning-creation^v, socialization^{vi}, identity-formation^{vii}, and maintaining social-order/control^{viii}. The all-encompassing element of religion makes it certainly difficult to operate the analytic scalpel over it.

If one follows the Purāṇic tradition, which commands significant control over the popular iterations of mytho-cultural narratives in Indian society, then religion constitutes the very essence of society (Durkheim 1912: 78). Symbolic involvement of Viṣṇu in protecting Pṛthvī in his Varāha form stands as the exemplary signifier of this conceptual scheme. Even the schematic distinctions of class/caste have a mytho-cultural backing in the form of *Puruṣa-Sukta* (RV X. 19-22). The mythological struggle between Skanda and Indra in Mahābhārata (*Āraṇya-kāṇḍa* ch. 225, 5-19) underlines the template of varying interaction between Āryandom and autochthonous populations (Majumdar 1948: 56), while the subversion and furious attestation of mother-goddess cults throughout Indian subcontinent appears in the ferocious form of Mahiṣāsūramardī in *Devīmāhātmyam*. Induction of Magi Brāhmaṇas in Indian society is narrated in Sāmba Upapurāṇa (XI. 18) in the form of Sūrya instructing Sāmba, who was seeking cure of his leprosy from Śakadvīpa Brāhmaṇas. All these examples invariably highlight the degree of closeness with which religion and society adhered to and sustained communion with one another in an Indic context.

In the upcoming subsections, we will endeavor to explicate terms which make the conceptual entanglement of religion-society precise. For this, we will comment upon Cultural imperialism, roles of social networks in ancient times, expansion of Varṇa ideology amongst horizontal denominations using tribal-class continuum, and lastly, mechanisms involved in the processual emergence of Brāhmaṇic hegemony, and how it adopted itself to two novel realities- affiliation with royal Kṣatriya houses, a phenomenon with multiple perspectival connotations, and their deployment amongst peripheral communities, where we encounter incipient appearance of multicultural discourse through interplay between Great-little traditions. This exercise, in our opinion, would give us a complete, wholesome and holistic socio-historical picture of relations in the Gupta Age.

Entangled networks religion & society: *Contexts and Consequences-*

Religious-beliefs are an important interface between religion and society.

They play a pivotal-role not only in defining lives of devotees and practitioners, but also in supporting imperial careers of kings. Since the State generally uses prevailing religious-beliefs to seek audience and rapport with the common populace, the conception of a deity's figure must be explained from this perspective. *Network Density*-

It refers to the strength of inter-connections among members in a societal system, and thus indirectly illustrates the flow of information among variegated strata of a society. If the network is reasonably deep, flow of information becomes swift. But, occasions of invasions and riots diminish such abilities of a network, and fuel the balancing feedback loop more than the other way around, and disrupting normal religious-system of an area. It is thus not a strange fact that ideas about the depiction and function of gods during the Gupta-era, gleaned primarily through dedication of temples, sponsorship of statuary etc. becomes clear only after stability comes into network, especially after the reign of Chandragupta II. This also possibly throws light on the horizontal transference of Varṇa ideology across societal arrangements, as networks become more capable of carrying denser information-load during periods of stability.

Social embeddedness-



Figure 1: Difference between depiction of Kārttikeya on Kuṣāṇa and Gupta gold-coins (Source- Wikimedia Commons, Creative Attributive License, CC-BY-SA 3.0).

This refers to the extent upto which non-economic forces affected religious-actions, and thereby permeated substantially and influenced considerably existent religio-cultural context. The stronger the inter-linkage between

religious and socio-cultural forces of operation, the quicker the influence of change in one sphere of action was felt in the other. The Mahāsena-triad of Huviṣka coin-type serves well as an example of this phenomenon, in which the Kuṣāṇa king changed the figurative idea of Kārttikeya, to separate him from previous Yaudheya model, and exclusively worshipped him as Mahāsena^{ix}. In Gupta period, a similar case can be made for the bi-modal adoption of Kuṣāṇa deities by Gupta celators, which can be described as a mirror image of the Kuṣāṇa processual complex. Gupta-era Kārttikeya shows influence of two social forces- *imperial paraphernalia*, which necessitated the figuration of Kārttikeya bearing closeness to Kumāragupta I himself (Gupta 1974: 132), and *folk-legends*, where Kārttikeya was more of vigilant and eternal youth with more connections to fertility than martial vigor (Clothey 1978: 23-25).

The Way of the Brāhmaṇas: *On emergent notions of distinction-*

J. Bronkhorst, in his study of the social conditioning of Brāhmaṇical communities over differing epochs of Indian History, constituted a standardized inventory of characteristic traits that defined essence of ‘being a Brāhmaṇa’ (2016: 97). It will be felicitous to comment upon the notion of identity of Brāhmaṇical social-groups in the Gupta-era. This may sound a little biased, as discussing only about a particular community and negating others paints a very selective picture of the past that we intend to reconstruct. However, such allegations can be negated on some sensible grounds- 1) Our topic is concerned with the condition of religion, and this section touches, somewhat tangentially, the typological enumeration of its cross-disciplinary relationship with other experiential domains, in order to present a *complete picture* of religion in society, not the other way around. 2) One can partially disagree but still cannot that Brāhmaṇas enjoyed closer proximity to issues of religious nature, since their prime occupational grounds more or less roamed around religion. 3) Brāhmaṇas were at a position to dictate terms of societal interaction and arrangement, due to their closeness with administrative echelons, and the higher degree of accumulated social capital. 4) the textual descriptions that we presently possess of the Gupta period were composed by Brāhmaṇic authorities, including the Purāṇas, a fact which bears much significance for our project. An additional caveat- though Bronkhorst crafted these categorical

constructs for Early Brāhmaṇic period (unspecified, though possibly upto c. 4th Century CE), we believe that they hold true for the period with which we are concerned, though obviously some structural adjustments would be made to prevent giving space to anachronism. Below, we closely follow Bronkhorst (2016: 109-150) in discerning the incipience of Brāhmaṇic distinction-

(A) Purity of descent-

We see considerable diversity in socio-cultural milieu of Brāhmaṇas during Rigvedic period. Goyal (1984: 33-38) observes that it was an epoch of social fluidity, natural to the social operations of any semi-nomadic group. With gradual settlement of Āryandom into mainland, dispersion around banks of major rivers, clearing of forests, variegated interaction with autochthonous populations, conceptions of social-distinction began to appear slowly but steadily into Vedic communities, taking more rigid forms in the *Atharva-vedic* period (Basu Roy 2010: 455). With greater marking of social boundaries, each social-group started forming ideology of its own. By writing of Brāhmaṇa texts, one can distinctively sense seeds of crystallization (Basham 1968: 78), as occupational segmentation based on inheritance started gaining foot in society, though, even when the Brāhmaṇa literature does not admit it, the influence of non-Āryan groups becomes poignantly perceivable, especially in philosophical inquisitions and questioning sacrosanct Vedic tenets. Proceeding further to Dharmasūtra^x, we see yet another juxtaposition: while these texts put forth the need for pure Brāhmaṇas, grudging acceptance is also made of two new social realities- the *Varṇasaṅkara* (mixed descent) and *Vrātya* communities, who resembled their Āryan counterparts in manner, dress, and custom, though non-performance of Vedic sacrifices caused them to ritually descent to a lower status; scholars differ over their genesis^{xi}, but agree that by c. 100 CE, Vrātyas began to include Yavanas as *Vrātya Kṣatriyas*, which was an outcome of the *focus shift* by Yavana communities who, especially after the establishment of Kṣatrapa hegemony in areas of Mathurā (family of Rajavula), and Ujjain (Kārdamaka Kṣatrapas), commenced proactive engagements with Brāhmaṇical communities. This perhaps gives some credence to the proposition of Jaiswal (1991: 13) that ‘caste and class relations in any period reflects existing material realities’. It is perhaps this

relaxation of attitudinal constructs towards notions of purity that we see a gradual emergence of a group amongst Brāhmaṇic lawgivers who attempted to incorporate mixed-origin Brāhmaṇas into mainstream Brāhmaṇic circles. To show the gradual change in lawgivers' viewpoint from extreme emphasis over purity of descent to conniving acceptance of mixed genesis (especially Brāhmaṇa-Kṣatriya admixtures), we give a brief survey of opinions regarding purity of descent as reiterated in Brāhmaṇical Literature-

The *Anuśāsanaparvan* of Mahābhārata presents the zeitgeist of the times in the following verses- “Yudhiṣṭhira asks whether a Kṣatriya, Vaiśyā or Śūdrā can gain the status of the Brahmin (13.28.23). Bhīṣma narrates the story of Matanga (13.28.4-30.16). Matanga was brought up as a Brahmin but one day his true status as a *chandāla*, because of his mother's adultery with one, is betrayed by his conduct; he spends the rest of his life in austerities in a vain attempt to gain Brahminhood and finally settles for the power to move at will in the sky”^{xii}. Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra (I. 17.3) avers- A child born from a Brahmin father in a Kṣatriya [mother] is a Brahmin (*brāhmaṇāt kṣatriyāyām brāhmaṇ[ah]*).

Gautama Dharmasūtra (IV.16) says- Children born in keeping with the natural order of caste-classes from women of the caste-class immediately below the man's are of the same caste-class [as the father]; from women two and three caste-classes below the man's, Ambaṣṭhas, Ugras, Niṣādas, Dauṣyantas and Pāraśavas (anulomā anantaraikāntaradvyyantarāsu *jātāḥ savarṇāmbaṣṭhograṇiṣād adauṣyantapāraśavāḥ*). The same idea is expressed in the *Anuśāsanaparvan* (XIII. 48.4) of Mahābhārata- A Brahmin [can] have four wives, [viz. a Brahmin, a Kṣatriyā, a Vaiśyā, and a Śūdrā]; in two of these [viz. the Brahmin and the Kṣatriyā] his self is [re-]born, in the two following ones [i.e. the Vaiśyā and the Śūdrā] Lower children are produced, of the same caste as their mother (*bhāryās catasro viprasya dvayor ātmāsya jāyate/ ānupūrvyād dvayor hīnau mātṛjātyau prasūyataḥ/*).

Closest to the Gupta Age, Mānava Dharmasāstra expresses the idea in the following verse: “As from two of the three caste-classes is born a child that is one's own self-being born from a woman of his own caste-class because of the contiguity so the same process applies to excluded men.” (Manu 10.28: *yathā trayāṇām varṇānām dvayor ātmāsya jāyate/ ānantaryāt*

svayonyām tu Tathā bāhyeṣv api kramah//). Elsewhere, however, Mānava Dharmaśāstra remains lukewarm with regard to the idea of Brahmins born from a Kṣatriya mother, as is clear from the following: Sons fathered by twice-born men on wives of the caste-class immediately below theirs are considered only ‘similar’, disdained as they are due to their mother’s defect. Even stronger is this verse: A Brahmin’s children by the three lower caste-classes, a Kṣatriya’s by the two lower caste-classes, and a Vaiśya’s by the one lower caste-class- tradition calls these six ‘low-born’. (*Manu 10.6: strīṣv anantarajātāsu dvijair utpāditān sutān/ sadṛśān eva tān āhur Mātṛdoṣavigarhitān*//).

While the attribution of definitiveness eludes us in regards to every historical event or phenomenon, one may aver that at this juncture, Jaiswal’s speculative formulation practically assumes prophetic actuality, as the readily changing opinions of Brāhmaṇic lawgivers regarding Brāhmaṇa-Kṣatriya offspring stemmed from the ever-growing number of such affiliations in real life (Mishra 1943: 66). As Goyal (2009: 36) reiterates, this causality was a processual product of two forms of socio-cultural developments- a) rise of Brāhmaṇas to Kṣatriya status, as can be observed in case of Kadambas of Banavāsī, whose founder Mayūraśarmma was a Brāhmaṇa, as stands proven by Talgunda inscription (Mirashi 1963: 297), and his very suffix ‘Śarman’. The change in status becomes ostensible when his successors use the Kṣatriya suffix ‘Varman’, to highlight Kṣatriya nature of their lineage, and also dictate new terms for *Jajamāna* relationships; b) *Brāhmaṇic aspirations*, wherein some Brāhmaṇas attempted to gain political clout not by directly altering social status, but by adding laurels to their already superior social-ranking by associating themselves *genealogically* with dominant Kṣatriya families. The clear instance and graduated effect of such maneuvering is seen in case of the Gurjara-Pratiharas, who, in reality, hailed from a Brāhmaṇic family, but changed their status through multiple strategies (Puri 1957: 92-99). Such socio-cultural developments, which subsequently entered religious-complex through the concomitant mythological fabrication of *Agni-kunḍa* sacrifice (Bhatia 1970: 89), made alternations in Brāhmaṇic ritual-order not only necessary, but imperative as well.

(B) Anointment and admittance-

An important ritual that assumed much significance in Gupta Age was that of *Upanayana Saṃskāra*, i.e. rite of the sacred thread. However, the importance of sacred thread rises especially during the Kuṣāṇa period, when most, if not all Brāhmaṇical deities are sculpted with the thread distinctively visible (Srinivasan 1997). During his heavily Indic-centered phase of coinage production, celators of Huviṣka showed Oeso-Śiva with the thread on (see fig.02). With the commencement of Gupta-era, Upanayana became an inseparable iconographical component of every deity-figure. Regarding the changing historical position of the sacred thread, Patrick Olivelle (2006: 53-55) insightfully commented-

“The term and concept of *dvija*, twice-born, is of recent origin. In all likelihood it was a theological innovation created sometime after Patañjali. Yet, in most of the Dharmasūtras, . . . with the notable exception of Āpastamba, the twice-born is a central category in their theology and in their articulation of the varṇa ideology.... The *Yājñopavīta* (or brahmasūtra), the sacrificial cord commonly called the ‘sacred thread’, is such a central feature of the ceremony of Vedic initiation (Upanayana) that in modern parlance it is often referred to as the ‘thread ceremony’. In the classical period, Brāhmaṇical identity was often based on the constant and uninterrupted wearing of the sacrificial cord. Yet, the ancient rite of Upanayana given in the Gṛhyasūtras and the Dharmasūtras make no mention of the sacrificial cord. Its compulsory wearing by those who have undergone Vedic initiation is found for the first time in the Dharmasūtras of Baudhāyana and Vaśiṣṭha, thus providing us a chronological boundary between these two later texts and the earlier ones of Āpastamba and Gautama.”

A story is often cited in Purāṇic literature to support the eternal sacrality Upanayana Saṃskāra, where a novice acolyte is initiated by a Guru into Vedic ritual-order after sanctifying his pact with the apprentice through invoking Agni, Savitr, Sūrya and Varuṇa (Kane 1962: 255ff.). Bronkhorst, however locates its incidence somewhere on a temporal spectrum when Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣada underwent an evidently Purāṇic redaction^{xiii}, as further evidence from the three versions of one story involving Śvetaketu,

a renowned and radical lawgiver in Ancient Indian thought. In one version, Gautama, father of Śvetaketu, becomes the pupil of King Pravāhaṇa Jaivali to learn esoteric doctrines that elude common understanding. The importance in the differentially crafted narrative is of *Samitapāṇi*^{xiv}.

The joint consideration of these two processual feats gives us a succinct glimpse of the emerging roots of Brāhmaṇical distinction, a phenomenon whose manifestation is attested by not just epigraphical registers, but also in socio-historical annals and textual records, and most importantly, by the uniquely structured propagation of Vaiṣṇava tenets across variegated geo-cultural domains. As stated above, the study of religion-society interactivity would remain incomplete in Indic context without highlighting the fundamental role of the Brāhmaṇical communities in altering religio-cultural contours. To state with brevity- the analytical constructs discussed in this subsection crafted potent Brāhmaṇic symbols and a strongly invariant social structure that not only affected reception of their doctrines amongst autochthonous social-groups, but also paved bridges that ultimately shaped socio-religious milieu of the Gupta Age.

The Propagation of Varṇa: *Mechanisms and manifestations-*

A socio-cultural concept that assumes disproportionate significance in discursive studies of Hinduism is that of Varṇa (O'Flaherty 1983: 67), which one can roughly translate as *class-system* (Basu Roy 2010: 436), although the association of genealogical categorization, occupational specification, geo-cultural variation and potential social mobilization within it can seldom warrant such loose translations the label of preciseness^{xv}. Origins of Varṇa are as obscure as its gradual transformation into Caste (*Jāti*). D.D. Kosambi (1956: 77) firstly tried to give a materialistic conception to the theory of Varṇa and caste-genesis, envisioning a hypothetical scenario where certain Āryan groups, after dismantling Harappan culture, incorporated endogamy, clan-exogamy, along with geo-cultural trade specialization and communitarian segmentation. However, this conception suffers from two weak points- it negates the possibility of functional specialization taking place organically inside Vedic social-groups, even when its inception is visible from differential allocation of rights and responsibilities even among mobile nomads (Liu 2012). Secondly, it bases it's logic upon Āryan invasion theory, which, in apt words

of J.P. Mallory (1991: 23), captures- “Half-truth, half-malice, and contorts them both together leading to creation of a dangerous admixture of bigotry and objectivity that ignites the most ardent passions, and distances many from asking difficult, but necessary questions- about who we really are, and how did we come here across through the endless sands of time?”.

The main problem lies not in methodology, but in the very nature of the problem itself, since in every epoch of Indian History, Brāhmaṇical conceptions (only of which we do have extent literary data) itself changes, from skin-complexion/cultural-complex based differentiation to one based on the ‘quality of womb’ , as averred by Yājñavalkya in Rāmāyaṇa^{xvi} (Goldmann IV. 32, 5), to the Dvija origination of every sentient being, and ultimately to the infamous *Puruṣa-Sukta* of Rigveda, which placed then contemporary social realities retrospectively into an eternal craft. Earlier, no restrictions existed in regards to social intercourse and dining, and even the Śūdras were not treated harshly (Srivastava 2019: 21-26). However, gradually fissures become clear, and reach the stage of absolute distinction during the Epic-Paurāṇic period. Here, after perusing classical sources, one may perhaps extend some degree of agreement with the suggestion of Jaiswal, who highlighted the fact that stricter regulation of caste rules and more widespread imposition of such normative constructs requires much substantiation, especially in the form of two related components- existence of material reality, and suppression of the feminine, in order to make the ‘enterprise of social distinction seething and one that coarsens even the core’^{xvii}.

However, what interests us more regarding the Varṇa system in Gupta Age is not its emergence, but its rampant propagation amongst other groups that were possibly not in the habit of enumerating individuals based on eternal social affiliations. B.D. Chattopadhyay (1994) was the first scholar to notice the notion of propagation of Varṇa categories from core Āryandom to peripheral social-groups as perhaps the most daunting yet distinctive diagnostic feature of the Early Medieval Period. Studying Uchchakalpa and Vālkhā inscriptions, who were actually at the very margin of Brāhmaṇic core territories, sheds interesting light on this phenomenological development, as traced from their patronage to a localized deity-figure of Piṣṭapurikādēvī cult^{xviii}. Herein, we suggest two mechanisms that could be

held causatively responsible for the occurrence of action, both of which are described in detail below-

Parochialization-

In order to capture the dynamic interaction between peasant communities and urban societies that lived close to each other, Robert Redfield (1956: 62-64) designed bi-modal mnemonical intercourse between Little-Great traditions. Though it may now seem as outright bigotry at best, and stereotyping at worst, but there are, in sooth, some traditional elements of differing cultural complexes that *defines* both their individualistic and relational identities. The process, however, unfolds from two directions- *Universalization*, through which cultural-elements of Little tradition become part of the Great tradition. For instance, it is known that snake and tree cults were (and still are) popular in tribal belts (Hasnain 1992). However, this metaphysical approach of theirs could be deemed as a measure of functional adaptation to the enveloping natural environment. Thence, the occurrence of same mode of reverence in an urban setting with little contextual and functional need could be seen as Universalization at its best. The reverse of it is called parochialization, i.e. when cultural-complexes of a Great tradition are adopted by the little tradition. A somewhat faint resemblance of this is seen in the process of *Sanskritization*, as proposed by M.N. Srinivas (1966). In alignment with the thematic contention of horizontal propagation of Varṇa ideology, one can see parochialization at work amongst the Āṭavika Rājya of Uchchakalpa in two ways- a) the reigning kings themselves claimed descent from Brāhmaṇic background, which reflects their ideological stance. Some scholars have even doubted whether the Āṭavika Kings were really following Varṇa system, or were merely asserting it in their inscriptions. While this alternative seems interesting, through the processual mechanism of parochialization, and from imposition of Cultural Hegemony (*vide infra.*), it seems more reasonable to purport that inscriptional emphasis in this context was not ‘all air and no substance’.

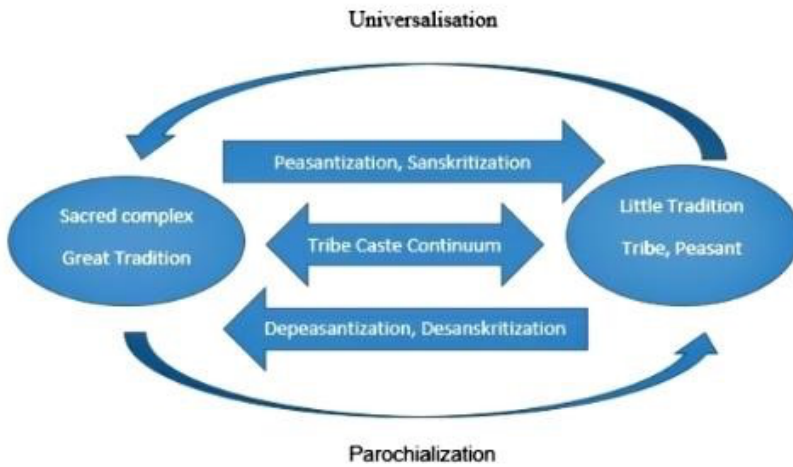


Figure 2: Socio-cultural dynamics of Universalization and Parochialization (Courtesy- Sinha 1961).

The second causative root behind manifestation of Varṇa ideology amongst Āṭavika communities further moves this attestation nearer to reality. Many regional dynasties in c. 3rd-4th Century CE became crucially dependent upon the Imperial Guptas in matters of ritual legitimation, domain consolidation, mytho-cultural exposition and for gaining ‘attentional-entrance’ in sociocultural contexts vastly different from a cosmopolitan one- sylvan countrysides, for which *Agrahāra* were donated with promise of action if any dispute arose. However, as Kulke (1992) rightly argues, the first ever effective utilization of the sanctioned space complementarily implied actual assertion of kingship over the concerned dominion. The newly settled Brāhmaṇic communities depended upon neighboring tribal populace. Some of the latter received employment in both manual and menial tasks, which helped them ascend the ladder of social distinction in Brāhmaṇic eyes with success. Close contact and co-dependence patently led to exchange of cultural-complexes, thereby paving yet another route for initiation of parochialization.

Tribe-Varṇa/Caste continuum-

While the correct term to be used herein is *tribe-caste continuum*, we have adduced the term Varṇa to underline the role of Varṇa ideology in propagation of Brāhmaṇic notions of societal organization, which

inevitably resulted in creation of castes. Tribe-caste continuum is an analytical tool to situate a particular social-group on the horizon that includes both organic model of castes and segmentary model of tribes (Stein 1969). Both differ in the basic idea of their constitution, for e.g. members of caste-system are dependent on each other, while tribes are autonomous and independent. Castes have a low land/man ratio, which makes differentiated access to natural resources the determinative factor of segregation in organizational principles, while tribes have high land/man ratio, which leaves just barely enough for everyone to utilize common grounds for grazing, cultivation, harvesting and other purposes. However, this neat division is not always visible, and what we get is a mixture of both typologies, sometimes within the same social-group. At this juncture, tribe-caste continuum comes to our rescue, since it allows a particular community to have both features, thereby offering it an eclectic stance even when diagnostic feats defy extremity in categorical constructs.

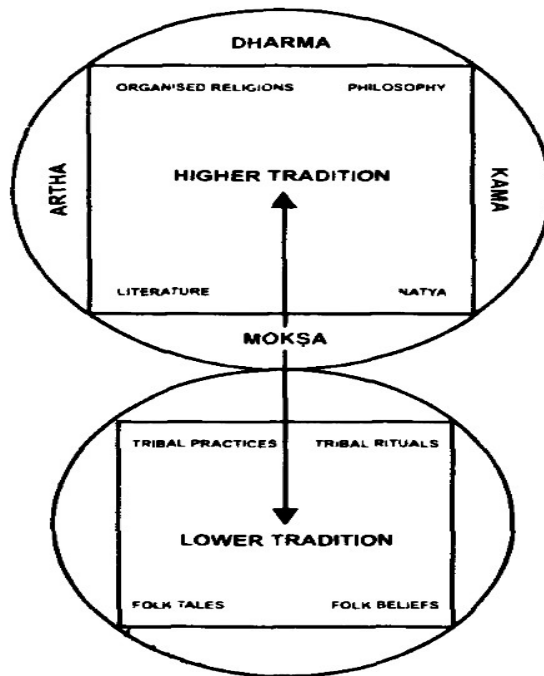


Figure 3: Folk-Urban continuum integrated into Little and Great traditions (Courtesy- Gupta 2003: 19; fig.27).

Redfield developed Folk-Urban continuum to provide a metaphysical dimension to the notion of Great and Little traditions. Essentially, it talked about the ideological orientations of members belonging to the highlighted groups, and how they used mental constructs to organize their life events and acts in a ritualized manner. Again, folk aspect shows maximal influence of Little traditions, whilst Urbane aspects felicitously bear cultural-elements of Great tradition.

It was S. Sinha (1965) who applied the conceptual tool of Tribe-Varṇa/Caste continuum in Indian context, further refined by George Bailey (1969) during his study of absorption of adjacent tribes into Rajaputa community in Rajasthan. The case has been made for Todas of Karnataka^{xix}, Jaungs of Orissa^{xx}, Hill Reddys of Andhra Pradesh^{xxi}, Tharu and other Central Himalayan tribes^{xxii} in erstwhile United Provinces. N.K. Bose reformulated it as the *Hindu mode of absorption*, which essentially stated that because of its inherent tolerance, structural plurality, and syncretic approach to lifestyles and rituals, multiple tribes found it easier to transition into agrarian and settled communities, and leave behind nomadic, semi-pastoral lives. D.N. Majumdar (1948: 22) forcefully argued for the existence of not extremes, but a bewildering variety of spectral datasets across different tribes, based chiefly on their mode of economy- from fisherman, pastoral, semi-pastoral with industrial work, cultivators, herdsman to completely urbanized, martial, servile tribes etc., each with its own pace of integration with mainstream and predominant social-groups.

Considering once again the case of Āṭavika Rājya, it is possible to enumerate two distinct streams of influence in regards to the Varṇa ideology- *firstly*, the Agrahāra communes, which sometimes deeply integrated themselves through control over body-politic, and proximal connections with important/nodal members of neighboring tribes. Oldenberg had once purported that such ‘missions’ of Brāhmaṇic adventurers yielded more success when ranking tendencies were already at a rise in the particular tribe. Moreover, since masters of Brāhmaṇical Agrahāra had obvious political prowess and social capital, avenues could have been developed to ascend further. As Nandi (1978: 50-55) posited, Brāhmaṇas had entered into a double-exchange patronage system with their respective earlier Jajamāna, which allowed them easy access to

urban/cosmopolitan institutions and services. Thereby, developing concourse with Brāhmaṇas also allowed tribal individuals some easiness in gaining admission to cosmopolitan cities. Moreover, one must consider another angle- with the expansion of communities and size of settlements, more and more Aryan communities were coming in vicinity of tribal forest-dwellers, which increased both communion and conflict. To gain admission into mainstream ritual-order, tribal groups started aligning themselves with their urban counterparts, which caused them to adopt certain societal practices as well, such as hierarchy, selective occupational specialization, inequality of accordance of social-status, and most importantly, the caste system as well. While caste-system was still not much rigid during Gupta Age, it had started exhibiting germinative ideas, and so had its deviations (see Bronkhorst 2016: 115ff.).

Gupta cultural hegemony: *Epitome of Socio-religious interactivity*

All the above subsections find synchronicity in the concept of cultural hegemony, as this singular construct not only showed epitome of socio-religious connectivity, but brought socio-cultural contexts closest to religious trends. It is often averred that Guptas were predominantly *Paramabhāgavatas*, though they also gave donations and patronage to other sects and cults, even including Buddhism and Jainism. Some scholars claim that it was a Gupta attempt to remain representative of all major religio-cultural streams that operated in their regime; this can be negated simply on the basis that Guptas were not living in a modernized, democratic republic, and the Imperial Gupta emperor unfailingly had enough leeway to give donations to the creed of his choice.

Others claim it was 'hedge-funding' to avoid excessive dependence over one specific sectariandenomination, which could be possibly true since sectarian affiliations were very mobile, and mostly shifted towards or in favor of more passionate patron. An extremist tendency is to identify the Guptas as extreme adherers of the Bhāgavata faith, which is also reflected in their epithet. Such a conception, however, leaves open only a very narrow window of imagination, and suffers from the fact that Guptas gave not only patronage, but representation to Śaivite orders, a consideration which well negates the previous contention. Arguments have been advanced, nonetheless, to identify yet another historical pattern- Śaivite grants

exemplify second-order patronage, i.e. patronage extended without direct involvement of the monarch. The principle of transitivity effectually makes such assertions redundant, since every grant was considered to come from the totality of imperial administration.

The excessive representational quotient of Bhāgavata sect in Gupta-era archaeological evidences possibly represents not personal preference, but political necessities, as Vaiṣṇavism gave Gupta kings multiple avenues to showcase their numinous status (see Gonda 1966). It can be said that Guptas attempted to secure sure footing in Vaiṣṇavite contexts to assertively proclaim the source of their numinous kingship, while the connection with other sects stemmed from both personal beliefs (*cf.* Kumāragupta I) and societal demands. However, were Guptas also using Vaiṣṇavism for establishing their cultural hegemony^{xxiii} over different levels of societal organization, from courts to the common masses? For truly assessing the nature of utilization of Vaiṣṇavite symbols and ideas in the establishment of Gupta cultural hegemony, we have to refer to three levels of materialistic dissection-

In court of rival lords-

Prayāga Praśasti mentions an interesting point immediately after presenting a minutely detailed picture of the scale of grandiosity of the Dakṣiṇāpatha campaigns of Samudragupta, and recording foreign powers (from Kuṣāṇas to Siṃhala) that obey the will of the Gupta emperor. In lines 24-25 refer to the ‘mark/symbol of Garuḍa’ that will be received by every subjected lord, and would in turn be utilized by then subordinated warlord whilst contacting Gupta sovereign.



Figure 4: Repousse gold-coin of Kumāragupta I (?) Mahendrāditya
(Courtesy- Classical Numismatic Gallery, Lot 96).

Interestingly, some repousse gold-coins have been discovered from Mahākosala (Chhotanagpur Plateau, Chhatisgarh), bear the traditional Gupta emblem of Garuḍa on the obverse, variously as sitting idle, combating snakes, in flight etc. On a closer scrutiny, the design of Viṣṇu's Vāhana gives not a faint, but rather strong resemblance to the Gupta Art idiom, as it was operational on Gupta coinage. It is possible that, having developed ritualistic equivalence with Viṣṇu, Samudragupta, and following him, other Gupta Kings also deployed Garuḍa emblems as standards of Gupta authority over the territoriality and sovereignty of the region, which, in a way, could be imagined as the materialistic substantiation of the Gupta ideal, where the mount of Viṣṇu carries metaphysically the 'footsteps of Lord Viṣṇu [=whose earthly rendition is Gupta king?] to allover Earth'. Discovered coins bear the Aditya biruda of Kumāragupta I and Skandagupta respectively. Goyal (1967: 69) believes that the Nalas issued these coins to commemorate alliance with Guptas. Interestingly, Nalas were Śaivites, and so were other dynasties that ruled in the region (Mirashi 1963). If our speculated vision of history holds true, then this was indeed a ritually dazzling and visually appealing utilization of Vaiṣṇavite ideas symbolically for exerting religio-cultural hegemony.

The Vākāṭaka change of faith-

The Vākāṭakas owed religio-cultural allegiance to Śaivism, as known from their land grants and donative acts. However, even the consistent reiteration of Śaivism in this dynasty experienced a spectacular Vaiṣṇava interregnum during the reign of Rudrasena II Vākāṭaka and his Gupta Queen, Prabhāvatī-guptā. Though it is possible that Rudrasena II himself had personal conviction in the efficacy and merit of propitiating Viṣṇu, the wordings elected by him for professing this faith indicate the presence of an overarching force of influence, which in this case, could be none other than Chandragupta II^{xxiv}. The Chakra of Viṣṇu could possibly even stand for Chandragupta II, who at this time was engaged in protected military struggle against the Western Kṣatrapas, whose growing stance also threatened Vākāṭaka sovereignty. The identity of Munda-Svāmin remains unspecified, though Bakker affirmatively believes that it probably denoted the personal god of Prabhāvatī-guptā. After Rudrasena II died young, Prabhāvatī-guptā remained long enough in administration to leave an

indelible Vaiṣṇava stamp on Vākāṭaka projects commissioned under her small, but historically effective regime. The most important of all was *Ramagiri*, which was, if archaeological findings do not fail us, located just next to the new royal abode of the Dowager-

Queen. The opinion of Bakker is important in this regard-

“The Poona Plates convey the impression that Prabhāvatī was personally involved in promoting the cause of the Bhāgavata religion. The charter was issued on the c. 12th of the bright half of Kārttika, after breaking the fast of Prabodhini Ekadashi, Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa’s awakening from his cosmic sleep. This festival of cosmogonic re-awakening had an important political dimension, as has been shown by Michael Willis in the case of Candragupta and Udayagiri, a case that must have been very well known to the queen. Styling herself as entirely devoted to the Bhāgavata (*atyantabhagavadbhakta*), at this occasion she bestowed land upon another bhagavadbhakta, the Āchārya Chanalasvamin. The grant was first ritually offered (*nivedya*) to the feet of the Lord. As we learn from Prabhāvatī’s Riddhapur Plates, which mention the Lord of the Ramagiri (*rāmagirisvamin*), this may be taken to refer to the main sanctuary on top of the Ramagiri.”

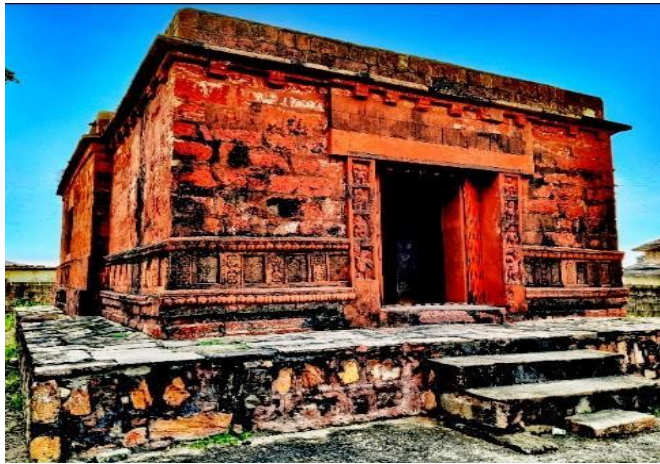


Figure 5: Front view of the Ramtek Narasiṃha Temple, built under the aegis of Prabhāvatīguptā (Courtesy- Ms. Sarah Welch, Wikimedia Commons).

From this description, Prabhāvatī-guptā appears as an agent of furtherance of the cultural hegemony of the Imperial Guptas, though with a distinct style and swerve of her own, one that made an everlasting impression on not just the methods through which royal patronage was dispersed, but on its practice as well. Prabhāvatī's influence is undoubtedly gleaned in the modes of veneration of Chālukyās and Yādavas, who, perhaps emulating the legendary matriarch, continued to worship Ramagiri till c. 13th Century CE (Bakker 2017).

Among the Tribes-



Figure 6: Quartz seal inscribed with the legend Dharmoraksatiraksitah
(Courtesy- Vijay Kumar 2015: 75; fig. no. 32).

Besides multiple peculiar features and offering tonnage of information-load regarding the developmental trajectory of caste system and Varṇa ideology, Inscriptions of Ātavika Kings exhibit yet another interesting scenario. Parivrājaka Mahārāja Saṁkṣōbha invokes Bhāgavata paramountcy in his inscriptions (c. 528/29 CE). Perhaps, in trying to keeping up with the joneses, neighboring tribal polities also begin to emulate the patterned activity of granting donation to Vaiṣṇava faiths. Much of importance is averred by Kumar (2019) in the following descriptive of changes in patronage patterns of Piṣṭapurikādēvī-

“Interestingly, Dhavaśaṇḍikā village had earlier been granted in 496/97 CE by Uchchakalpa Mahārāja Jayanātha, father of Mahārāja Śarvnātha, to a clerk or an accountant (divira) Sarvavadha, for the maintenance of a Viṣṇu temple (bhagavat-pādānām).⁹⁰ In 516/7 CE, transfer of half of the village Dhavaśaṇḍikā to goddess Piṣṭapurikādēvī by Mahārāja Śarvnātha, therefore, refers to a

significant religious development. The deities Viṣṇu and Piṣṭapurikādēvī resultantly began to share the village resources of Dhavaśaṇḍikā and were connected to each other.”

There are many ways to regard and consider this situation. An important process is in play here, which directly signifies the assertion of Gupta cultural hegemony at the third and most intimate level of social organization. Kumar (2021), in his study of seals and sealings stored at the Kurukshetra Museum, Haryana, notes an interesting fact- “With the beginning of Gupta Age, local Gurus ascend to popular support and mass mobilization. Yet, invariably this act of much socio-historical purport occurs within the prism of Vaiṣṇavism.... This necessarily had something to do with the way Bhāgavata religion was positioned during the Gupta-era”. Truth cannot be near to anything else. With the State oriented towards propitiation of Bhāgavata creed as the supremest, it only gave a nudging incentive to local Brāhmaṇical circles and regional administrative echelons to extend more patronage towards Vaiṣṇavite affiliations. It was not a surprise that majority of the royal Gupta court, barring few notable mentions, practiced or processed belief in Vaiṣṇavism, as this sect had become an integral part of the *identity politics* of the Guptas. Deliberatively, such acts, committed at all levels, by royal courts to petty households inevitably expanded multifold not only the ritual and reverential horizons of Vaiṣṇavism, but consequently Gupta cultural hegemony as well, which we well know, was quite intimately linked with Vaiṣṇavite idioms, and thereby deeply affected the contours of both society and sacrality.

Conclusion:

The study of society and religion gives us fundamental forces that not only structured the religiocultural milieu of any particular time period, but also effectually shaped annals of history. It is a common practice in indological analysis to draw conceptual categories in a watertight manner, with seemingly no interaction or synergy between them, a scholastic tradition that hardly takes more of the perplexing complexities with which socio-religious interactivity defined each other’s sphere, but sometimes operated inside of it. While political machinations of ancient India started to assume integration with sectarian and cultic developments (Balagangadhara 2012),

other domains of analysis still retain some distance, and tend to analyze religious forces and practices from their own specialized point of view. While not wrong, within the disciplinary orbit of Indology, persistence of such a practice prevents us from getting a more nuanced, multifaceted glimpse of the past. That religion in Indic contexts was a formidable, rather omnipresent force of influence is made abundantly clear in the works of Gonda (1954)-

“In fact, it is perhaps more accurate to say that the very act of defining religion, by demarcating it as a separate category distinct from social structure, art, economics and other aspects of human activity....yet, such a separation often makes little sense when examining non-Western and non-industrialized cultures in which the political and religious spheres are not only closely entwined, but typically indistinguishable is itself.”

In our study, we used several conceptual tools to comprehensively elucidate socio-religious interactivity in Gupta Age. Network-analysis helped us understand the myriad ways information initiated from one domain caused alterations and amendment to occur in the latter, especially in case of socio-religious metamorphosis of Kārttikeya, from being a herald of Kuṣāṇa martial power to Gupta numinosity and eternal youth amongst the common masses. The socio-historical framework of Bronkhorst permitted us analyze the tenets of their cultural distinction, that demarcates their defining roles in many contexts, and further helps us to position them as definitive agents of socio-cultural change and carriers of Vaiṣṇavism amongst peripheral groups, a phenomenon whose seeds were sown in Gupta-era, but effects are witnessed in the early medieval period. The epitome of socio-religious entanglement is best evinced in cultural hegemony, where we showed how religious forces, especially Vaiṣṇavism, not only participated in dictating political destiny of dynasties, but also introduced novel ritual acts and reverential traditions, some of which add still practiced. This small survey underlines the functioning of social forces in shaping religion, and through a religious lens, gives us a glimpse of Gupta society. Future researches would provision more data, and therefore would allow us to probe deeper into the contours of hoary antiquity.

ENDNOTES:

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- ⁱ Durkheim, *Elementary*, p.12.
 - ⁱⁱ Malinowski argued- “religion had more specific functions than what Durkheim purported- it helps individuals to deal with the psychological stresses which occur in times of social change – such as births, marriage and deaths. Beliefs can help people ‘make sense’ of death for example and can act as a source of catharsis for the bereaved. Religious rituals also help society through the disruption to social order caused by life changing events such as death.” (see Hasnain, *Socio-cultural Anthropology*, p.75).
 - ⁱⁱⁱ Malinowski, Bronislaw. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: A Study in Functional Anthropology*. London: Routledge & Sons Ltd. 1922, p.78.
 - ^{iv} Parsons, Talcott. *The Social System*. New York: Macmillan Co. 1951, p.70.
 - ^v Individuals actively engage in a process of meaning-making within religious contexts. The interpretation of symbols and rituals is subjective and varies among members of a religious community. Personal experiences and interactions with others shape an individual’s understanding of religious symbols, contributing to the diversity of interpretations within a religious tradition.
 - ^{vi} Religious beliefs and practices are learned through social interactions. Families, communities, and religious institutions play crucial roles in transmitting religious symbols and values. The process of socialization into a religious tradition involves individuals internalizing the symbolic meanings associated with that religion. This shared understanding fosters a sense of belonging and community.
 - ^{vii} Religious symbols and interactions contribute to the construction of individual and collective identities. An individual’s religious identity is not static but is continually negotiated through social interactions. The way individuals interpret and embody religious symbols influences their self-concept and how they relate to others within and outside their religious community.
 - ^{viii} Religious symbols and rituals contribute to the establishment and maintenance of social order. They provide a shared framework of

meaning that helps regulate behavior within a community. The shared symbols and beliefs within a religious group can serve as a basis for social cohesion, creating a sense of unity and common purpose. ^{ix} Mann, *Rise of Mahāsena*, p.212. ^x Kane, P.V. *History of Dharmaśāstra*. Vol. 2. Poona: Oriental Book Agency. 1962, p.48.

^{xi} Oldenberg regards them as pre-Vedic Aryans, who had arrived in India during early migratory waves. R.P. Chanda, sees the “gradual brachycephalization of invading [read: incoming] Āryan hordes from Central Asia, who subsequently inter-mingled with native residents of Indian subcontinent, and began to form separate communities by c. 6th Century BCE”. Sircar (1942) and Sankalia (1951: 53) envisioned in Vṛātyas the formation of uniquely configured communities of Āryans who had ventured beyond Āryandom eastwards, especially towards Videha and Magadha, the two hot-seats of non-Āryan social-groups, as described in epic literature .

^{xii} The Sutta Nipāta of the Pāli Buddhist canon somewhat expresses similar opinionated stance by putting the following words in the mouth of a Brahmin called Bhāradvāja who is asked how one becomes a Brahmin: 13 “When one is wellborn on both the mother’s and the father’s side, and is of pure descent for seven generations, uncriticized and irreproachable with reference to birth, to such an extent one becomes a Brahmin.” And the self-proclaimed and proud Brahmin Ambattha is humbled when the Buddha reveals to him that he is not well-born, being the descendent of a slave girl. 15 Birth is not the only factor that plays a role in the appreciation of a Brahmin: asceticism and learning add to his glory, but they do not replace the requirement of birth. Bronkhorst further comments- “The idea that seven generations are required to guarantee the purity a person’s descent recalls GautDhS 4.22: “By successively marrying persons of the higher or the lower caste-class (utkarṣa-apakarṣa), in the seventh generation the offspring moves to the one or the other caste-class” (tr. Olivelle, modified). Kane (HistDh II/I p. 62 ff.) discusses the phenomenon of jātyutkarṣa, also in other texts; seven generations often play a role here”.

^{xiii} If, then, we accept that the redactor of Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 6.2.7 thought that something was missing in the text he received, what exactly was it? We have seen that in parallel passages in the Brāhmaṇas and

Upaniṣads aspiring students are normally depicted as bringing samidh ‘fuel’ for the sacred fire. But Gautama approached King Pravāhaṇa without bringing fuel; here the two versions of the story agree. For the redactor of Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣada 6.2.7 this was, as it appears, incongruous, so that he added the remark that in former times one could become student by means of words only, i.e., without bringing fuel for the sacred fire. The redactor of the Chhāndogya Upaniṣad version, on the other hand, does not appear to have taken offence at the fact that Gautama interrogated the king without becoming his student. This finds unexpected confirmation in the immediately following story in the Chhāndogya Upaniṣad (5.11 ff.). There we read how six Brahmins—one of them being Uddalaka Āruṇi, presumably the same as Gautama, the father of Śvetaketu approached King Aśvapati Kaikeya “with fuel in their hands” (Samitapāṇi), apparently with the desire to become his students. The king, however, starts his teaching without having accepted them as students (anupanīya; ChanUp 5.11.7).¹¹⁹ One is tempted to believe that, in the opinion of the redactor of Chhāndogya Upaniṣad 5 (supposing there was only one for these two stories), there was no problem connected with an instruction by a Kṣatriya of Brahmins in which the latter do not formally become pupils of the former. The exact significance of the expression anupanīya “without having accepted them as students” becomes clear by comparing Chhāndogya Upaniṣada 5.11 ff. with the alternative version of this story at Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa 10.6.1. There Aśvapati Kaikeya does accept the Brahmins as pupils. This is described in the following terms:¹²⁰ they came again to him, with fuel in their hands, saying: “We want to become thy pupils.”... He said: “... put your fuel on [the fire], ye are become my pupils.”

^{xiv} Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 6.2 tells the story of the encounter between Śvetaketu and King Jaivali Pravāhaṇa of the Pāṇchāla. The king asks Śvetaketu a number of questions, which the latter is unable to answer. Obviously embarrassed, Śvetaketu returns to his father, who had also been his teacher, and reports what has happened. The father, who too must admit his inability to answer these questions, decides to become pupil of Pravāhaṇa Jaivali; the term used for studenthood is brahmacarya (BArUp 6.2.4). The king accepts the father, here called Gautama, as pupil on condition that he “seek in the usual manner”,¹⁰⁸ Then the Upaniṣad continues:¹⁰⁹ “I come to you, sir, as a pupil!”—only by means

of words, verily, 110 men of yore came as pupils. So with the acknowledgment of coming as a pupil he remained. The phrase “only by means of words, verily, men of yore came as pupils” shows that this custom existed no longer at the time of redaction of this passage. III Why was it inserted? Did its author really know what had been customary in the past? Or did he perhaps have other reasons for believing that men of yore became pupils by means of words only? A comparison with the parallel passage in the Chhândogya Upaniṣad (5.3 f.) shows that he may very well have had such other reasons. 112 This passage tells essentially the same story as Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 6.2, with the same characters playing the same roles. But here, unlike in Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣada 6.2, Śvetaketu’s father does not become a pupil of Pravāhaṇa Jaivali in the irregular sense but offers the traditionally sanctioned fuel fire before joining the king’s court as a disciplined pupil.

xv Olivelle, *Between the Empires*, p.98.

xvi King Janaka asks a pertinent question to the sage Parāśara on this subject: The whole of mankind has sprung from Brahman. Now, it is a law of nature, and the Śrutis too say the same, that the offsprings share in common the nature of that from which they are created. Therefore, all the men on earth must have been of one varṇa when they were created! Whence, then, did the distinction start? Parāśara replies thus: It is true that the offsprings begotten by one “is none else than the begetter himself”; but, if “the soil and the seed are inferior, the offspring born of these will be inferior”. Now, proceeds the sage, though mankind originated from the Great Brahman himself, all did not spring from the same part of his body; the Brāhmaṇas sprang from his mouth, the Kshatriyas from his arms, the Vaiśyas from his thigh and the Śūdra from his feet. But it is to be remembered again that originally only these four varṇas were created; all other classes besides these “are said to have originated from an intermixture of these” (samkarajāh smritāh). In this manner, for instance, were the sub-sections in the Kshatriya varṇa created. Parāśara then gives a list of fourteen such sub-classes like the stenas (robbers), sūtas (charioteers), nishādas (hunters, fishermen), śvapākas (chandālas) and others.

xvii Jaiswal, Suvira. *Caste: Origins, Functions and Mechanisms*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Pvt. Ltd. 1991, p.28. xviii “The state formation in the

fifth-sixth century CE central India involved the transition of the tribal population into varṇa-based society and assimilation of folk goddess Piṣṭapurikādēvī into Brahmaṇa pantheons after the arrival of the Guptas, whose two subordinate dynasties the Parivrājaka and the Uchchakalpa embraced monarchy and erected an administrative structure akin to their overlord in the land of Āṭavika-rājās. In their state polities, few families controlled higher administrative positions, and generation after generation retained hold over powerful and resourceful posts, for instance, Bhōgika, Amātya, Dūtaka, Sāmdhivigrahika, Mahāsaṃdhivigrehaka, Mahābalādhikṛta and Upārika. In spite of the Gupta's influence, the Parivrājaka and the Uchchakalpa rulers devised their own strategies to consolidate their authority and bring the territories of āṭavika-rājās under their control.... It appears that the Parivrājaka rulers, having originated from a tribal background, claimed a Brahmaṇa ancestry and projected Mahārāja Hastin as the protector of the varṇaāśramadharma (dharma based on varṇa and Āśrama) to legitimize their political authority as well as control over the resources).

xix In the Toda tribe in Nilgiri Hills there is a certain amount of specialization of functions as in the caste system. Some tribes manage to settle down at the peripheries of villages accept menial jobs from caste Hindus and eventually get into the Hindu fold. Members of the tribal groups may adopt the surname or gotra of a caste and also marry into the caste. Some rich tribal people manage to enroll themselves in high caste with the help of caste priests. Tribes when enter the caste fold lose their identity.

xx NK Bose in the study of Juangas of Orissa find out the ways in which two different castes appeared from Juangas who are the hill dwellers of Keonjhar district. Their economy was completely based on forest and shifting cultivation. Due to British economic policies and population pressure and section of Juangas came out of forest and settled at Pallahar and Dhankanal. Palaahar took to wheat cultivation and tribal rituals and adopted caste practices. Over a period of time they started to enter into matrimonial alliances with cultivating caste and emerged as a Jāti. Dhankanal also became Jāti through the same process but in contact with oil men Teli. Therefore, two Jāti is emerged from same tribe. NK Bose called this method as Hindu method of absorption Incorporation.

^{xxi} Hill Reddys of Andhra- the hill Reddys of Andhra Pradesh studied by Haimendorf. Among them all social life is centered around village. Village chief Mukhtadar was responsible for collecting land revenue and paying it to the British government. They came in contact with outside culture. Some of the Mukhtadar families changed their lifestyle and became plough cultivators. Over a period of time, they started observing caste practices and started receiving ritual services from Liṅgāyata priest. It elevated their status as Kshatriya and dissolved their tribal identity.

^{xxii} The study of two major Central Himalayan tribes Tharu and Khasa reveals that though they have a tribal matrix and continue to practice certain distinctive tribal customs they have been accepted as Kshatriya. Their culture had been modeled on the ways of living Rajputs and Brahmins of the neighbor plain areas. With their fast adoption of the Hindu names and establishment of social connections with the Rajputs and Brahmins of the plains. They declare themselves as Rajputs and with Brahmins constitute the apex of the social order. With the long and continuous contacts with the regional Hindu castes the tribals of Kharwars has long been assimilated as Rajput castes. There are numerous other tribes which have undergone selective acculturation and have added selected traits or features of the regional Hindus to their respective traditional cultures. In this practice of acculturation most of them failed to occupy any rank in the castes hierarchy while few of them were integrated into the lower strata of the Hindu social system. ^{xxiii} “The term refers largely to the exercise of power in a cultural relationship in which the principles, ideas, practices, and values of a powerful, invading society are imposed upon indigenous/neighbor cultures in the occupied/subjected areas. The process is often used to describe examples of when the compulsory practices of the cultural traditions of the imperial social group are implemented upon a subordinated/conquered social group. The process is also present when powerful nations are able to flood the information and media space with their ideas, limiting countries and communities’ ability to compete and expose people to locally created content.” For more information, see White, Livingston A. “Reconsidering Cultural Imperialism Theory” *Transnational Broadcasting Studies* no.6 Spring/Summer 2001.

^{xxiv} Bakker comments upon this phenomenon in the following manner- “In his Mandhal Plates Rudrasena II styled himself as someone ‘whose rule is based on the chakra, the emblem of the Bhāgavata’, i.e. Viṣṇu; in other words, just like his father-in-law Candragupta, Rudrasena professed to be a Bhāgavata. The Vākāṭaka kings before and after him, with the exception of Prthvīśeṇa II, were all devotees of Maheśvara (Śiva), i.e. they were Māheśvaras, so it seems that his conversion to Bhāgavatism had been part of an ante nuptial contract. And there is more in this inscription, which may be dated to c. AD 400, that links up with Candragupta, who, at about this time, was engaged in his grand Udaygiri project. The opening of the Mandhal inscription runs as follows: Success! Approved. By order of Lord Munda-Svāmin, God of gods, who holds the conch, discus and sword; after He had made the Nāga king stretch out on the waters of the ocean, He has entered a state of yogic sleep, while lying on the serpent coils of that (king) Ananta (the Infinite One) a bundle of expanded hoods bending (over Him by way of canopy).”

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Sustainable Diversification and Income Stability in Punjab's Agriculture through Dairy Cooperative System

TARASHI GUGLANI AND ADITYA PARIHAR

Abstract

Punjab's agriculture, dominated by the intensive wheat-rice monocropping system covering approximately 85% of cultivated land, generates high productivity but creates pronounced seasonal income gaps, thereby increasing financial vulnerability for small and marginal farmers. These temporal slumps in income, compounded by other factors including groundwater overexploitation, soil carbon decline, and other climatic stresses (erratic monsoons, rising temperatures, extreme events), threaten long-term agrarian sustainability and rural livelihoods. The present paper draws exclusively on secondary sources, including official reports, cooperative records, policy analyses, and peer-reviewed literature. Data on milk production, cooperative performance, seasonal gaps, and environmental indicators were collected from official websites and databases, cross-verified for consistency and reliability. Dairy cooperatives, structured in the three-tier model (village societies, district unions, Milkfed/Verka federation) established in 1973 under Operation Flood, has transformed dairy into a high-output sector, achieving around 139–144 lakh tonnes annual production despite bovine population decline, with record turnover of ₹6,395 crore in FY 2024 - 25 (Milkfed Punjab, 2025; DAHD, 2025). The framework, when integrated with the agricultural seasonal lags, ensures year-round daily income by directly addressing their concerns of monocropping, water stress, and climatic risks. Dairy cooperatives offer a resilient, institutionally robust pathway to mitigate seasonality and resource pressures in Punjab's agrarian landscape. By delivering economic stability, ecological restoration, and inclusive rural

development, dairy cooperatives represent a strategic alternative for sustainable diversification amid ongoing agricultural challenges.

Keywords: Dairy Cooperatives, Agriculture, Sustainability, Diversification, Three-tier system

Introduction

Punjab's agriculture has long been celebrated as India's "granary," contributing significantly to national food security through the intensive wheat-rice cropping system that occupies approximately 85% of the state's net sown area (Punjab Agricultural University, 2025). This monocropping pattern, a legacy of the Green Revolution, has delivered remarkable productivity gains but at substantial long-term cost. The rigid seasonal crop cycle creates predictable temporal gaps, leading to sharp income fluctuations for small and marginal farmers (who constitute around 80% of holdings), elevated debt levels (averaging ₹2–3 lakh per household), and migration (NABARD, 2025). In addition to this, the practice of monocropping further leads to reduced soil nutrient value, with organic carbon levels declining 20–30% since the 1970s due to intensive chemical inputs and residue management practices (Indian Council of Agricultural Research, 2025).

These challenges are further deepened by environmental stresses like climatic changes including erratic monsoons, rising temperatures (1–2°C warmer winters affecting crop germination), and extreme events such as floods and heatwaves, which exacerbate the vulnerabilities of the farmers, shorten the viable planting windows and increase failure risks. Furthermore, the problem of groundwater overexploitation remains acute since the state of Punjab has recorded the highest extraction rate in India at 156.36% of annual replenishable resources (Central Ground Water Board, 2025) and out of the 153 assessment units, about 72.55% are categorized as over-exploited, driven largely by rice's high water demand (~3,000 liters/kg). Amid these multi-level constraints, dairy farming, which is based on the three-tier cooperative model (village-level societies, district unions, and the state federation) poses a robust and innovative diversification strategy (Punjab Economic Research Institute, 2021). Punjab ranks among India's

top milk producers, with output estimated at around 139–144 lakh tonnes in recent years (Department of Animal Husbandry and Dairying, 2025), and per capita availability at 1,318 grams/day, which is the highest nationally. The Milkfed cooperative, established in 1973, still provides remunerative markets for producers with record high turnovers and expanded capacities for production (Milkfed Punjab, 2025; Verka.coop, n.d.), despite a 31% decline in bovine population since 1990, through innovation, adaptability, new techniques, larger investments and institutional support.

In addition to this, recent scholarly work has also been consistently supporting the concept of environmental sustainability. This has been further backed in a recent comparative life cycle assessment study between Punjab and Rajasthan conducted in 2024, which revealed that Punjab's dairy systems exhibit lower environmental impacts in key categories such as agricultural land occupation, water depletion potential, and climate change contributions. These findings support dairy as a lower-impact diversification option compared to water-intensive rice-wheat monocropping, reinforcing the potential for cooperatives to promote circular economy models that reduce stubble burning, alleviate groundwater pressure, and enhance soil health in Punjab's stressed agrarian context (Singh et al., 2024).

Complementing this, another study conducted on 450 farmers across Punjab in 2025 on the sensitive implications of climate change on milk productivity found that a 1°C temperature rise reduces monthly milk yield by 1.72 L/cow and 1% humidity increase by 0.59 L/cow, with combined stressors projecting a 4.1% decline. The research advocated for adaptive strategies including heat-resistant breeds, cooling systems, modified feeding, and institutional support in order to maintain production resilience (Haider et al., 2025). In Punjab, this literature highlights the value of dairy cooperatives in buffering climatic vulnerabilities during crop gaps, thereby positioning the three-tier system as a practical, institutionally supported diversification pathway amid rising temperatures and erratic weather. These studies collectively affirm dairy cooperatives environmental and adaptive advantages, providing robust empirical backing for their role in addressing Punjab's agricultural challenges. This paper examines dairy cooperatives as

a targeted intervention to bridge crop gaps, stabilizing the farmer incomes, and promoting sustainability in Punjab's agrarian landscape. It first clarifies historical misconceptions about dairy's evolution from subsistence to a structured, high-output sector post-White Revolution and Milkfed's establishment in 1973. It then analyzes the three-tier system's architecture and contemporary performance. Finally, it demonstrates how the dairy system integrates with crop systems, reduces income risk, mitigates resource stress, and aligns with broader goals of resilient, diversified agriculture. By addressing the interplay of seasonality, monocropping legacies, climatic pressures, and resource depletion, dairy cooperatives offer a pathway toward economically viable and ecologically balanced farming in Punjab.

Objectives

The paper aims to:

1. Trace the historical development of dairy cooperatives in Punjab and its evolution into the three-tier cooperative structure;
2. Analyze key gaps in Punjab's dominant wheat-rice monocropping system, including seasonal income volatility, soil degradation, groundwater overexploitation, and climatic vulnerabilities, and evaluate their implications for small and marginal farmers;
3. Assess dairy cooperatives as practical interventions that bridge crop gaps, providing year-round income stability, to enhance resource efficiency and sustainability;
4. Explore the social work perspective on dairy cooperatives, highlighting their role in community empowerment, risk reduction, women's participation and building an inclusive rural development in Punjab.

Research Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative research approach, relying exclusively on secondary sources. Relevant information was systematically gathered from credible, publicly available documents, including official government reports, cooperative sector records, and academic literature

accessed through platforms such as ResearchGate, Springer, and IJCRT. The process involved targeted collection of documents from official websites and databases, followed by extraction and cross-verification of data, which was then thematically synthesized to establish linkages between wheat-rice monocropping gaps, environmental stresses, and dairy cooperative interventions, ensuring objectivity, reliability, and academic rigor. The main limitation of this secondary-source methodology is the dependence on published data availability and the absence of real-time primary farmer perspectives.

I

Historical Development of the Dairy Cooperatives in Punjab and its Evolution into a Three-tier Cooperative Structure

The importance of milk as a product was felt thousands of years ago when humans first started domesticating animals like goats and sheep, during the Neolithic Revolution. Initially, these animals were valued only for their meat, but people soon discovered milk as a renewable resource. Archaeological evidence, such as ancient pottery with milk fat residues, suggests that dairy practices emerged in regions like the Middle East and Europe, wherein the forager became a farmer and a shift from the lifestyle of a hunter gatherer to becoming more settled in their practices started (National Geographic, 2019). Over time, dairy shifted from subsistence farming to a structured industry, particularly with the rise of agriculture-based societies. The new world encyclopedia describes the word agriculture as the combination of two Latin words, wherein agri means “a field” and culture means “cultivation or tillage of soil”, thus the meaning of the word agriculture is “tillage of the soil of a field.” In the modern usage of the English word, agriculture covers all activities essential to food, feed, and fiber production, including all techniques for raising and processing livestock. People engaged in such activities are known as a part of agricultural or agrarian society (ScienceDirect, n.d.). By the 19th century, industrialization spurred demand, wherein decisions about who produces our food, what food is produced, how it is produced, and who gets to eat that food have been steadily moving from households and governments to big corporation boardrooms (James et al., 2012). These

differential dependencies and power imbalances led to the small farmers struggling against large-scale producers (Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future, n.d.).

This tension birthed dairy cooperatives - collective organizations where farmers pooled resources to process and market milk. The first notable cooperative emerged in 1867 in Denmark, when Hjedding Dairy Cooperative was founded, inspiring models like the U.S.'s Dairy Farmers of America (Schmidt, 2014). These cooperatives were formed by groups of small farmers seeking solutions to common problems. These groups, digressing from individual dairying models into collective and cooperative centralized systems, drew upon cooperative traditions that immigrant dairy farmers brought with them from their home countries which thereby led to a revolution that went on empowering farmers, ensuring fair prices and quality control (Henriksen et al., 2012). While addressing the need of the hour, an added catalyst during the 1800's was the development of railroads which allowed for the increased movement of milk to cities. Expanding urbanization made it necessary for families to obtain milk from more distant places, thereby giving more opportunities and structure to the dairy farmers. By the late 1800s, the milk marketing system was steadily moving toward a much-structured model and cooperative associations were developed around the major cities in the eastern part of the United States and in Chicago with the purpose of negotiating milk prices with milk dealers and distributors (National Milk Producers Federation, n.d.). During this period, disturbances around the negotiation and the price settlements started becoming a problem and due to the unfair means adopted by the milk distributors, the dairy farmers started facing many problems. To save the lives of the latter came a social reformer named Friedrich Wilhelm Raiffeisen who raised his voice and set up a model called the "Raiffeisen Model" which served the main goal of solving this serious economic and social problem. Friedrich Wilhelm Raiffeisen, a 19th-century German cooperative pioneer, developed a framework for organizing cooperatives based on principles of self-help, self-governance, and self-responsibility (Raiffeisen Bank International, n.d.). This model emphasizes empowering small-scale farmers by uniting them to collectively manage resources, improve bargaining power, and access markets, thereby maintaining their

democratic control and community focus. Driven by the vision of Raiffeisen, farmers formed cooperatives which were not geared towards profit, but to supporting their members. Members' savings were pooled in so-called loan fund associations and were available for distribution to members in the form of low-cost long-term loans. This gave many people a form of economic credit liberty wherein they could borrow money for investments which perhaps became a road map to combat poverty and exploitation by moneylenders. Farmers were now free and no longer forced to sell at knock-down prices in times of oversupply, allowing them to wait until prices had recovered, giving them the power they deserved, in their own hands (Raiffeisen Luxembourg, 2023). This model which was developed on the principles of localized, community-based group reliability, self-funding, democratic governance, prioritization of welfare over external gains and inclination towards non-profit orientation spread across many countries like in India and then the first dairy plant in 1930 named as Polson Limited at Anand, Gujarat which became the top dairy brand in a short span, meeting every demand for the dairy products even during the world wars (Jain, 2021), which later, as a result of the nationalist movement, paved the way for the birth of the AMUL (a part of the Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation Ltd.) model of dairy development in India.

India dairy cooperative structure is a three tier structure also called the Anand pattern which consists of the village dairy cooperative society (DCS) at the bottom level which is a voluntary association of milk producers who wish to market their milk collectively to the society. Each DCS has a milk collection centre where members take milk every day and then get paid as per the tested fat and SNF(solid non-fat) percentages in their milk products. The district milk unions are in the middle of the hierarchy that serves the purpose of being the apex body by procuring the milk collected by the societies, processing it and arranging for the marketing of the liquid milk and milk products. The unions also provide proactive inputs like veterinary care and artificial insemination for productivity enhancement of the animals. At the top is the state milk federation who are further in continuous coordination with the National Dairy Development Board(NDDDB) and the National Cooperative Dairy Federation of India (NCDFI) (National Dairy

Development Board, n.d.-d). Functions of the village level dairy cooperative societies (DCS) are primarily operational which include the milk trading and provision of input services, the functions of the second tier include procuring, processing and marketing milk and milk products, and the third tier is involved in the marketing of milk and milk products, managing production planning and coordinating with state government, central government, NDDB and other agencies.

The success of the Anand model, implemented by Amul in Gujarat, did not remain confined to its place of origin and it soon caught the attention of policymakers across India, including the Punjab government, which replicated this cooperative model. The replication in Punjab was largely driven by the National Dairy Development Board (NDDB), established in 1965 under the vision of Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri, who was inspired by Amul's transformative impact and gave the responsibility of scaling the model nationwide to Dr. Verghese Kurien. Punjab, a state with a strong agricultural base and significant milk production potential, became a key focus due to its need to address issues like exploitation by middlemen, seasonal price fluctuations, and lack of structured milk marketing. The Punjab government, in collaboration with the NDDB, adopted Anand's three-tier structure in order to empower the local farmers and integrate them into a self-sustaining dairy economy. The increased expansion of the dairy cooperative framework into Punjab brought many systematic changes including:

- Promoting women's participation in the cooperative societies: Addressing the empowerment gaps is the active duty of a society and key steps like encouragement, awareness, role development and capacity building should be taken proactively to ensure women get a seat at the table.
- Strengthening the governance structures: Realignment of the framework systems which guides the operations, decision making and the member participation in order to create a more robust, democratic and inclusive mechanism.
- Enhancing financial transparency and audits: Ensuring that the

cooperative funds derived from the milk sales, government subsidies and the loans are managed, accessible and disclosed openly. In addition, engagement in third party audit must be a mandate in order to avoid mismanagement or embezzlement.

- Tightening the provisions for the supersession of committees to ensure accountability: Mechanisms and the systems for the replacement or suspension of a cooperative's elected committee, often by government or higher authorities, due to mismanagement or corruption should be clearly mentioned and known by the society members and tighter and stricter processes should be set in place to prevent abuse while ensuring effective oversight.

Thus, the historical development of dairy cooperatives in Punjab marks a profound transition from fragmented, subsistence-level backyard farming which were much prevalent in the pre-independence and early post-independence eras, to a highly organized, productivity-driven modern sector over time. This evolution was catalyzed by the White Revolution and Operation Flood (launched nationally in 1970) and emphasized farmer-owned cooperatives as the pathway to equitable milk marketing and rural empowerment. The establishment of the Punjab State Cooperative Milk Producers' Federation Limited (Milkfed) in 1973, followed by its expanded mandate in 1983 when milk plants from the Punjab Dairy Development Corporation was transferred to the three-tier structure, not only boosted milk production through breed improvement, veterinary services, and assured remunerative prices but also transformed dairy into a reliable economic pillar for small and marginal farmers. By clarifying these milestones, it could be concluded that Punjab's dairy cooperatives are not mere traditional adjuncts but a strategically evolved institutional innovation that laid the foundation for addressing contemporary agricultural challenges, including seasonal crop gaps and resource stresses, through sustained farmer-centric growth.

II

Key Gaps in Punjab's Monocropping System and Assessing Dairy Cooperatives as a Practical Interventions

The wheat-rice monocropping regime in Punjab perpetuates a cascade of environmental and socioeconomic gaps that lead to multiple problems for the small and marginal farmers. Firstly, repetitive cultivation cycles deplete essential nutrients, leading to structural fatigue where organic carbon content has plummeted 20–30% since the 1970s, resulting in micronutrient deficiencies (e.g., zinc, iron) and reduced microbial diversity (ICAR, 2025; Bhattacharyya et al., 2015). This degradation then leads to the soil being prone to erosion and having lower water-holding capacity which in turn amplify economic strain on the farmers where pest proliferation from monoculture demands increase pesticide reliance, posing health risks like chemical exposure and long-term morbidity (Farmonaut, 2025; The Agricultural Crisis in Punjab, 2025). These claims are also backed by multiple studies which indicate that about 60% of Punjab's geographical area suffers from extractive farming-induced deterioration, further aggravated by crop residue burning that contributes 20–30% to regional air pollution and exacerbates carbon loss (Meena et al., 2021; Farmonaut, 2025). Secondly, groundwater overexploitation represents another entrenched gap, with Punjab's 1.3 million tube wells extracting resources at 156.36% of replenishable levels, rendering 72.55% of assessment units are over-exploited and water tables are plunging at a very high rate, especially in the districts like Moga and Patiala, where depths now exceed 300 feet (CGWB, 2025a, 2025b; Farmonaut, 2025). The increased demand of rice, a crop which consumes around 4000 to 5000 liters per kg, drives 97% of agricultural groundwater use, making irrigation an increasingly unaffordable livelihood practice (Aulakh et al., 2009; Gupta et al., 2021). Small and marginal farmers, lacking access to efficient technologies, bear the brunt through disrupted cropping schedules and crop failures, falling into debt spirals and intergenerational poverty in a workforce where over 50% depends on agriculture (NABARD, 2025; Kunte & Patankar, 2015).

Lastly, climatic vulnerabilities intensify these gaps, where events like erratic monsoons (delayed 7 to 10 days in the present years), warmer

winters and extreme events (Punjab floods) shorten planting windows and escalate pest/disease outbreaks (Farmonaut, 2025; Liu et al., 2021). In regions like western Punjab, these shifts exacerbate over-mechanization and biodiversity loss, while market swings from global trade pressures add another layer of economic unpredictability, leaving small farm holders exposed to input price hikes (e.g., 20% urea increase in 2025) and residue management dilemmas (Downing et al., 2022; Roul et al., 2023). Collectively, these gaps foster social disruptions, including family separations from migration and gender inequities in labor burdens, underscoring the need for adaptive, diversified strategies to safeguard livelihoods (Pal et al., 2022; The Agricultural Crisis in Punjab, 2025).

Amidst all these agricultural gaps, dairy cooperatives, via the three-tier Anand model including village societies for procurement/fair pricing, district unions for processing/veterinary/AI inputs, and Milkfed/Verka federation for marketing/value addition/exports, offer a strategic, targeted, and evidence-based interventions that bridge the gaps, stabilize incomes, and enhance resource efficiency/sustainability (Birthal et al., 2017; Milkfed Punjab, 2025). The Anand model is governed by the principles of:

- Democratic Control: Each member has a say in decision-making. The producers have a control on their produce and their best interest is ensured by the rest who are part of this system.
- Equity: The profits, bonuses and benefits are fairly distributed amongst all. In addition, the opportunities of animal productivity enhancement, research or gap analysis and other input service delivery is open and equal for each and every member of the cooperative.
- Transparency: The entire system is set in such a way that there is no discrepancy involved. The data from the quality testing and other results is made the base parameter for distribution of payments so that no sort of biases come into the equation. The record books are also maintained at every step to ensure the whole system is governed with the values of clarity and trust building (National Dairy Development Board, n.d.-e)

This model thereby provides a consistent cash flow during off-seasons, yielding around 10% higher prices than informal channels, adding approximately 4,100 rupees per year per milch animal and contributing to uplift the small farm incomes, reducing debt/migration risks (Kaur & Singla, 2018; Kunte & Patankar, 2015). Circular resource use repurposes paddy straw as fodder, recycles manure for soil nutrient/carbon restoration (improving microbial health in degraded monocropped fields), and lowers global warming potential by 26% in integrated systems (ICAR, 2025; Frontiers, 2024; International Journal of Research in Agronomy, 2025). Water efficiency advances via hydroponics/silage (90% savings vs. traditional fodder) and Milkfed programs (ration balancing), easing extraction in over-exploited zones (CGWB, 2025a; Verka.coop Fodder Development, n.d.; CEEW, 2026). Climatic resilience stems from heat-tolerant breeds (e.g., Murrah), indoor management, and relief (fodder during floods), with evidence linking cooperatives to sustained yields amid temperature rises (ResearchGate, 2025; CEEW, 2026). These mechanisms foster social capital (women's 50%+ role in dairy), inclusive growth, and ecological balance, as Milkfed's ₹6,395 crore turnover (2024–25) demonstrates scalability (Milkfed Punjab, 2025; Kumar & Kaur, 2024; Johl, 2002 via ICRIER). Dairy cooperatives thus represent a research-supported, institutionally robust pathway to transform monocropping vulnerabilities into resilient, diversified agrarian futures in Punjab.

III

Social Work Interventions: Bridging Agricultural Gaps and Theoretical Underpinnings

From a social work standpoint, dairy cooperatives in Punjab represent more than economic enterprises. The three tier system functions as a deliberate initiative grounded in empowerment theory, strength based community development, and feminist social work frameworks, altogether addressing the structural inequalities while serving as a vital lifeline for agricultural vulnerabilities (Gutierrez, 1990; Kabeer, 1999; Nath, 2022). These cooperatives embody the profession's commitment to social justice, collective efficacy, and human rights by transforming fragmented rural households into organized communities capable of self-determination and

mutual support (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014). In the context of Punjab's agrarian crisis, which is marked by seasonal crop gaps, resource depletion, debt traps, and migration pressures, along with many hidden pain points, dairy cooperatives offer a practical "ray of hope" by providing a stable, year-round income alternative that directly mitigates the socioeconomic fallout of wheat-rice monocropping (NABARD, 2025; The Agricultural Crisis in Punjab, 2025; (National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development, 2025).

At the societal level, cooperatives foster inclusive rural development by building social capital, strengthening community bonds, and promoting equitable resource distribution across caste, class, and gender lines (Putnam, 2000; Birthal et al., 2017). Through village-level societies and women dairy cooperative societies (WDCS), this system creates a space for participatory governance, where marginalized farmers gain a voice in the process of decision-making, negotiate fair milk prices, and access extension services (veterinary care, training, fodder programs) that were previously inaccessible (NDDB, n.d.; Verka.coop, n.d.). Perhaps, this collective action reduces isolation and vulnerability for these farmers, which thereby perfectly amalgamates with social work's emphasis on community resilience and empowerment (Saleebey, 1996; Kochar & Kaur, 2015). Additionally, women's participation stands out as a transformative intervention while looking at the lens of capitalising dairy systems in the income crisis that agriculture faces. With women comprising around 70 to 85% of the dairy workforce in Punjab, cooperatives actively challenge patriarchal structures by integrating them into formal roles of milking, processing, marketing and other leadership positions in WDCS (Government of India, 2025; Emerald Publishing, 2021). These memberships have further been linked to enhanced financial autonomy (33 to 37% of women gain personal control over income), improved household decision-making, reduced domestic violence, and better nutrition/health outcomes through cooperative-led advisory services (Nath, 2022; CEEW, 2026), thereby perfectly aligning with the feminist social work principles that prioritize gender equity, agency, and intersectional inclusion (Dominelli, 2002).

Lastly, dairy cooperatives also serve as a strategic buffer against agricultural gaps. By delivering daily milk-based income during lean periods (May–June post-wheat harvest and post-rice fallows), they provide immediate risk reduction, often adding 40–100% to small farm earnings, while also enabling a circular resource use (paddy straw as fodder, manure for soil fertility) that counters monocropping's environmental toll (Kaur & Singla, 2018; ICAR, 2025; Frontiers, 2024). This dual role of economic stabilization and ecological restoration positions cooperatives as a plausible stepping stone for vulnerable households, alleviating debt, migration pressures, and psychosocial stress in a state where agriculture remains the primary livelihood for over half the population (NABARD, 2025; Kumar & Kaur, 2024).

Theoretically, these outcomes are anchored in:

- Empowerment theory (Gutierrez, 1990): Cooperatives build personal, interpersonal, and political power by giving farmers control over production and marketing.
- Asset-based and Strength-based community development (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993): They mobilize existing household assets (livestock, family labor) for collective benefit rather than deficit-focused approaches.
- Feminist social work (Dominelli, 2002): WDCS initiatives advance gender justice by redistributing power and resources within patriarchal rural structures.
- Social capital theory (Putnam, 2000): Networks of trust, reciprocity, and norms within cooperatives enhance community cohesion and collective action capacity.

In summary, dairy cooperatives in Punjab, viewed through a social work lens, transcend their economic function to become powerful social interventions. They empower communities, reduce livelihood risks, amplify women's agency, and bridge agricultural gaps while being firmly rooted in established theoretical perspectives that prioritize inclusion, resilience, and social justice. Strengthening these cooperatives through gender-sensitive policies, digital training, and expanded outreach could

further amplify their role as catalysts for equitable and sustainable rural development in Punjab.

Conclusion

Punjab's wheat-rice monocropping system continues to generate severe seasonal income gaps, soil degradation, groundwater depletion (156.36% extraction), and climatic risks, placing small and marginal farmers under persistent economic and social pressure (CGWB, 2025a; ICAR, 2025; NABARD, 2025). Dairy cooperatives, through the established three-tier Milkfed/Verka model, provide a powerful countermeasure that reduces vulnerability and restore ecological balance (Milkfed Punjab, 2025; Kaur & Singla, 2018; Kumar & Kaur, 2024). Backed and grounded in empowerment theory, asset-based development, feminist social work, and social capital frameworks, the Anand model exemplify inclusive, community-driven solutions to structural agrarian challenges (Gutierrez, 1990; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Dominelli, 2002; Putnam, 2000).

Thus, strengthening dairy cooperatives via targeted policy including enhanced training, digital access, gender-sensitive expansion, and alignment with White Revolution 2.0 mission, offers Punjab a scalable, evidence-backed route to resilient, diversified, and socially just agriculture. By converting seasonal and resource vulnerabilities into opportunities for equitable growth, dairy cooperatives stand as a strategic pathway toward sustainable rural prosperity.

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Framing Gender through Patriarchy: A Study of Masculinity and Femininity in Indian Cinema

REENA CHAUDHARY

Abstract

Patriarchy, as a deeply entrenched social system, continues to shape gender roles and expectations within Indian society, with cinema functioning as both a mirror and a mold of these values. This paper critically examines the portrayal of masculinity and femininity in two contemporary Bollywood films, Kabir Singh (2019) and Animal (2023), through the theoretical framework of R.W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity. Using a qualitative approach, the study analyzes how these films construct male dominance, female subordination, and intergenerational dynamics of patriarchy. Findings suggest that while Kabir Singh normalizes toxic masculinity by romanticizing male control and female passivity, Animal reflects patriarchal family structures that transmit hegemonic ideals of male authority, emotional suppression, and generational trauma. In both cases, women remain relegated to symbolic or supportive roles, highlighting their marginalization in cinematic narratives. The paper argues that such portrayals not only reflect existing patriarchal norms but also contribute to their cultural reinforcement. By unpacking these representations, the study emphasizes the need for more nuanced and equitable gender portrayals in Indian cinema.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Hegemonic Masculinity, Indian Cinema, Gender Representation, Kabir Singh, Animal, Bollywood

Introduction

Patriarchy refers to a social system in which men hold primary authority in both public and private spheres, shaping gender roles and hierarchies across institutions such as the family, workplace, government, and media. It not only prescribes specific behaviors for men and women but also sustains the

belief that men are inherently superior, thereby legitimizing gender-based inequalities. Walby (1990) emphasized that patriarchy is reflected not only in gendered divisions of labor but also in cultural norms that perpetuate male dominance. These structures often become naturalized, making them resistant to change.

Indian cinema, particularly Bollywood, has historically functioned as both a mirror and a mold of social values, embedding patriarchal structures in mainstream narratives. While female characters have traditionally been confined to roles such as dutiful wives, mothers, or sacrificial figures, more recent works occasionally depict women in independent or empowered roles, as seen in *Queen* (2014) and *Piku* (2015). However, such representations remain the exception rather than the norm. The media's capacity to reproduce gender ideologies makes film an important site for analyzing how masculinity and femininity are framed within a patriarchal order.

In this context, it is important to clarify the concepts of masculinity and femininity. Masculinity refers to a set of attributes and behaviors traditionally associated with men, such as strength, assertiveness, competitiveness, leadership, and emotional control. Femininity, by contrast, encompasses traits historically linked to women, including nurturing, sensitivity, emotional expressiveness, beauty, and compassion. These categories are not innate but socially constructed, varying across cultures and historical moments. As Gauntlett (2002) notes, media representations play a key role in shaping how societies interpret these gendered traits, often presenting masculinity as dominant and femininity as subordinate.

By examining how films construct masculinity and femininity within patriarchal frameworks, scholars can better understand how popular culture reflects and sustains gendered power relations. Bollywood's deep cultural penetration amplifies its influence in shaping such perceptions, making it a powerful site for exploring how hegemonic ideals of gender are legitimized or challenged.

Literature Review

Scholarship on patriarchy and gender has highlighted how power relations

are sustained across cultural and institutional domains. Walby (1990) conceptualized patriarchy as a system embedded in multiple structures of society, while Connell (1995, 2005) introduced the notion of hegemonic masculinity to explain how culturally dominant forms of manhood secure men's power over women and alternative masculinities.

Within the Indian context, Chakravarti (2003) examined how caste and patriarchy intersect to reinforce gender inequality, whereas Banerjee (2010) explored how Indian cinema reflects and sustains patriarchal ideologies. Ganguly (2004) analyzed cinema through the lens of cultural hegemony, demonstrating how dominant narratives normalize gender hierarchies, while Chatterjee (2017) drew connections between law, patriarchy, and violence as depicted in Indian society and films. Gauntlett (2002) further argued that media representations provide role models that audiences adopt in shaping gendered behavior.

The *O Womaniya!* 2023 report by Ormax Media and Film Companion revealed persistent gender disparities in Indian cinema, showing that men dominate storylines and screen space while women's voices remain marginalized. This underscores the urgent need for closer examination of gender representation in contemporary films.

Patriarchy in Indian Cinema

Indian cinema, especially Bollywood, has served as both a mirror and a mold of societal values, often portraying gender roles in ways that reflect the patriarchal fabric of society. Masculinity and femininity, as depicted on screen, are constructs deeply entrenched in cultural expectations. As a platform with massive reach, cinema has the potential to subvert patriarchal norms. The rise of gender-sensitive narratives highlights the power of media to challenge and reshape societal values. Bollywood's deep cultural penetration amplifies its role in shaping societal attitudes toward gender. By consistently portraying men as dominant and women as subordinate, the industry perpetuates systemic inequality.

By examining films like **Kabir Singh (2019)** and **Animal (2023)**, an effort has been made in the present paper to critically assess how cinema sustains patriarchal norms and explores the power dynamics between genders. These two films are highly sociologically relevant to a study of gender dynamics

in cinema due to their distinct yet complementary explorations of masculinity and patriarchy. **Kabir Singh** offers insight into how patriarchal values inform romantic relationships, portraying women as passive objects of affection and men as entitled pursuers, a trope that influences societal expectations around gender roles. By framing masculinity within the family context, **Animal** provides a lens to study the broader societal structures that perpetuate gender inequality and rigid definitions of manhood. Together, these two films, allow for a multidimensional analysis of how Indian cinema reflects and sustains patriarchal norms, making them pivotal case studies for exploring the interplay between gender, media, and society.

Given this context, the central **research question** guiding this paper is: How do contemporary Indian films like Kabir Singh and Animal portray masculinity and femininity, and to what extent do these representations reinforce or challenge hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal gender norms?

Objectives

The paper sets out to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine how gender roles—specifically masculinity and femininity—are constructed and depicted in the films Kabir Singh and Animal.
2. To analyze these portrayals through the lens of sociological theory i.e. hegemonic masculinity.
3. To explore how such cinematic representations reflect and perpetuate patriarchal ideologies within Indian society.

Theoretical Framework

The following mentioned theory provides a useful framework for analyzing how cinema reflects and shapes societal norms. It aligns with the depiction of toxic relationships and patriarchal expectations. It provides a theoretical basis to critique cultural glorification of male dominance and connects individual character behaviors to broader societal structures.

Hegemonic Masculinity Framework

Hegemonic masculinity, conceptualized by R.W. Connell in 1995, refers to

the culturally dominant form of masculinity that upholds male dominance over women and other subordinated masculinities. It is not static or universal but varies across cultures and historical periods, adapting to the power structures in society. Connell emphasizes that this form of masculinity legitimizes patriarchy by reinforcing the dominance of men and the subordination of women. Characteristics often associated with hegemonic masculinity include emotional suppression, aggression, competitiveness, and the idealization of heterosexual relationships. Further, it is perpetuated through media, education, religion, and other social institutions, making it appear natural and desirable.

The theory is applicable to understand the film *Kabir Singh* as Kabir represents the epitome of hegemonic masculinity. His aggression, emotional outbursts, and possessive love are framed as signs of strength and passion. This normalization perpetuates toxic masculinity by portraying these traits as inspirational. Through Connell's lens, Kabir's dominance is not just over Preeti but over societal expectations of acceptable male behavior. His rejection of vulnerability and insistence on control reflect the pressures and privileges of hegemonic masculinity.

The theory is applicable to the film *Animal* as the film's narrative focuses on patriarchal family structures, where hegemonic masculinity is enforced through the expectations placed on the male protagonist to "protect," "lead," and suppress emotions. The film provides an opportunity to critique how hegemonic masculinity is intertwined with Indian cultural norms about family honor and male duty.

Methodology

This paper uses a qualitative and theoretical approach to study how gender is shown in films. Two Hindi movies—***Kabir Singh* (2019)** and ***Animal* (2023)**—were chosen as case studies. These films were analyzed using Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity to understand how they show male and female roles in a patriarchal society. The analysis is based on the film content and supported by existing research and media reviews.

Rationale for Selection of Films

The selection of *Kabir Singh* (2019) and *Animal* (2023) is deliberate, as both films represent a shift from conventional Bollywood portrayals of

masculinity. Unlike earlier narratives where male dominance is often moderated by moral resolution, these films foreground aggressive, emotionally repressed, and controlling male protagonists with minimal critique. Kabir Singh intensifies patriarchal norms within romantic relationships, while *Animal* extends them into the domain of family and intergenerational dynamics. Their contemporary relevance and widespread popularity further make them significant case studies, as they not only reflect but also amplify evolving constructions of hegemonic masculinity and femininity in Indian cinema.

Cinematic Representations of Hegemonic Masculinity and Femininity

Kabir Singh: Romance and Male Dominance

Kabir Singh (2019), directed by Sandeep Reddy Vanga, is a Bollywood remake of the Telugu film *Arjun Reddy*. The film follows Kabir, a highly successful but volatile medical student, whose life spirals into addiction and self-destruction after his love interest, Preeti, is married off by her family. The film explores the intersection of love, power, and control, sparking significant controversy for its portrayal of toxic masculinity and gender dynamics.

By presenting Kabir's controlling and toxic behaviors as intrinsic to his love for Preeti, the film reinforces traditional notions of romantic relationships rooted in male dominance and female submission. Kabir's dominance is glorified, while Preeti's silence and passivity are idealized as feminine virtues, reflecting broader patriarchal expectations in Indian society.

Kabir Singh epitomizes hegemonic masculinity as conceptualized by R.W. Connell. The film normalizes Kabir's dominant and aggressive behavior as an archetype of "ideal" masculinity. His traits—emotional repression, violence, and control—are valorized; reinforcing the belief that male dominance is essential in romantic relationships.

Patterns of Control: Kabir's behavior toward Preeti illustrates his entitlement over her autonomy, evident in his micromanagement of her interactions, decisions, and even personal space. These actions, far from being questioned, are romanticized as signs of deep love.

Social Expectations of Men: Kabir's inability to express vulnerability and

his reliance on aggression reflect the societal pressures of hegemonic masculinity, which demands dominance and emotional stoicism from men.

Animal: Family, Authority, and Patriarchy

Animal (2023), directed by Sandeep Reddy Vanga, is a Hindi-language film that explores complex family dynamics, particularly the turbulent relationship between a domineering father and his son. The film dives into themes of masculinity, generational trauma, and patriarchal structures within Indian families. As the protagonist struggles to reconcile his father's expectations with his own identity, *Animal* critiques traditional notions of male dominance and the emotional suppression often demanded of men in patriarchal societies.

The film presents patriarchal family systems, where authority is concentrated in the hands of male figures, perpetuating cycles of dominance and emotional repression. The father-son dynamic illustrates how patriarchal values are transmitted and reinforced across generations. The father's actions are not only a reflection of his own upbringing but also a means of maintaining control over his family. The father performs hyper-masculine behaviors to assert his authority, often resorting to aggression and emotional distance. This performance reflects the cultural ideal of men as protectors and disciplinarians. The strained relationships between male characters and the women in their lives highlight how patriarchy not only subordinates women but also fractures emotional bonds within families. Women in the film primarily serve as emotional anchors for the male characters or as symbols of family honor. Their lack of agency underscores the secondary status assigned to women in patriarchal structures.

The film's narrative is deeply rooted in Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, which emphasizes male dominance, control, and emotional suppression. Both the father and son characters embody and challenge these traits in different ways.

Father's Role: The father represents the archetype of hegemonic masculinity, enforcing traditional norms of strength, emotional stoicism, and authoritarian leadership within the family. His belief in harsh discipline and rejection of vulnerability shapes the son's understanding of masculinity.

Son's Struggle: The protagonist is caught between emulating his father's model of masculinity and seeking emotional connection. This internal conflict highlights the pressures young men face to conform to patriarchal expectations of dominance and control.

Comparative Discussion

Both films construct masculinity through aggression, control, and emotional repression, while femininity is defined through silence, subordination, and service to male-centered narratives. However, Kabir Singh frames toxic masculinity within the context of romantic relationships, legitimizing male violence as love, whereas *Animal* embeds it within the family structure, glorifying violent masculinity as loyalty and duty. Together, these films demonstrate how patriarchy adapts across domains — romance and kinship — yet consistently sustains male dominance.

Connell's framework of hegemonic masculinity helps us understand how these films valorize a singular form of masculinity while delegitimizing alternatives such as sensitivity, equality, or vulnerability. Walby's (1990) conception of patriarchy as a system rooted in both private and public spheres is also evident: Kabir Singh enforces control in intimate relationships, while *Animal* reinforces male dominance within the family and society at large.

Unlike traditional Bollywood films where male characters are often corrected or reformed by the end, these films continue to show aggressive and controlling behavior as acceptable. This makes such forms of masculinity appear normal rather than problematic. As a result, they strengthen existing patriarchal ideas instead of challenging them.

Analysis and Discussion

The films Kabir Singh (2019) and *Animal* (2023), though distinct in their narratives, converge in their portrayal of masculinity as inherently dominant, emotionally repressed, and controlling—hallmarks of what Connell (1995) terms **hegemonic masculinity**. Both films exemplify how Indian cinema perpetuates patriarchal ideologies by presenting these traits as desirable or necessary within male characters, while simultaneously marginalizing female agency.

In *Kabir Singh*, the protagonist's emotional volatility, possessiveness, and lack of respect for the woman's autonomy are not only normalized but romanticized. Kabir's behavior is framed as a passionate and intense form of love, which implicitly validates male entitlement in relationships. Preeti, the female lead, is almost entirely passive and voiceless, embodying the traditional ideal of femininity—submissive, obedient, and forgiving. Her lack of resistance is not critiqued but portrayed as a virtue, reinforcing the notion that a woman's silence is equivalent to consent or affection. This aligns with the broader patriarchal value system in which male dominance is assumed and female submission is encouraged.

Similarly, *Animal* critiques masculinity through the intergenerational dynamics between father and son, but it ultimately reinforces several patriarchal values. The protagonist, shaped by a controlling and emotionally distant father, internalizes the same traits—emotional suppression, aggression, and a belief in male superiority. The film's depiction of masculinity is entangled with the concept of honor and protection, often at the expense of emotional well-being and interpersonal understanding. Women in the film serve largely as emotional stabilizers or moral guides, lacking autonomy or depth beyond their relationship to the male characters. This reinforces the secondary role of femininity in patriarchal structures.

Both films demonstrate how hegemonic masculinity is not simply about being male, but about conforming to a specific ideal of manhood—one rooted in power, control, and emotional rigidity. Connell's framework helps unpack how these cinematic portrayals act as cultural scripts that socialize viewers, particularly young men, into adopting similar behavioral norms. These films contribute to the normalization of gender hierarchies by celebrating traits associated with hegemonic masculinity and minimizing the costs these behaviors impose on both men and women.

Moreover, as Walby (1990) and Chakravarti (2003) emphasize, patriarchy is maintained through institutions such as family, media, and law. These films reflect how patriarchal structures are sustained and transmitted across generations—not just through explicit messaging, but through affective and narrative strategies that present dominance as love and control as care.

While both *Kabir Singh* and *Animal* do offer moments that hint at critique—such as Kabir's professional downfall or the protagonist's

emotional conflict in *Animal*—these are overshadowed by the broader narrative arc that continues to glorify problematic male behavior. Thus, the films serve more as mirrors of patriarchal society than as tools for transformation.

The continued popularity and commercial success of such films also highlight the audience's complicity in perpetuating these norms. The normalization of male aggression and female subordination in mainstream cinema contributes to a cultural environment in which patriarchal values are validated and reproduced.

Conclusion

This paper critically examined the portrayal of masculinity and femininity in Indian cinema through the case studies of Kabir Singh (2019) and *Animal* (2023), drawing on Connell's (1995, 2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity. Both films reflect and reinforce deeply entrenched patriarchal norms, consistently portraying male protagonists as dominant, emotionally repressed, and entitled, while female characters are largely passive, submissive, or reduced to symbolic roles. These representations not only mirror societal expectations within a patriarchal order but also serve to legitimize and perpetuate them.

While Kabir Singh normalizes male aggression in romantic relationships, framing possessiveness and control as expressions of love, *Animal* situates masculinity within the family, glorifying violent loyalty and filial duty. Together, they illustrate how hegemonic masculinity adapts across social domains, maintaining male dominance in both intimate and kinship contexts. Connell's framework provides insight into how these cinematic portrayals act as cultural scripts, instructing audiences—particularly young men—on socially sanctioned forms of manhood. Walby's (1990) perspective on patriarchy as a system embedded in both private and public spheres further underscores the societal significance of these narratives.

The continued popularity and commercial success of such films highlight the role of cinema in shaping public perceptions of gender. By celebrating traits associated with hegemonic masculinity and marginalizing female agency, these narratives risk reinforcing harmful gender norms, while also revealing the audience's complicity in their perpetuation. At the same time,

films like *Queen* and *Piku* suggest that audiences are receptive to alternative portrayals, demonstrating the potential for cinema to challenge patriarchal stereotypes and promote more nuanced, equitable representations of gender.

In conclusion, **Kabir Singh** and **Animal** exemplify how mainstream Bollywood both reflects and reproduces patriarchal values. Recognizing these patterns is essential not only for scholarly inquiry but also for fostering critical media literacy and advocating for more socially responsible cinematic narratives that can contribute to reshaping cultural understandings of gender.

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Evaluating Public Interventions for Addressing Sex Ratio Imbalance in Punjab: Trends, Constraints, and Policy Pathways

MANJINDER KAUR

Abstract

In order to have societal transformation, the birth of a daughter must be celebrated and her education, progress, and safety must be treated as collective responsibilities. There should be communities to showcase girl achievers as role models to inspire change. Punjab historically faced a worrying imbalance between the number of boys and girls fueled by social discrimination, regressive mindsets, and the inhuman practice of female foeticide. However, due to strict enforcement the law, targeted monitoring, raids, registration systems, and sustained awareness campaigns, the situation has begun to improve. According to Civil Registration System, Punjab's Sex Ratio at Birth improved at birth improved from 906 females per 1,000 males in 2021-22 to 922 in 2023 and 931 in 2024 reflecting a 25 point rise due to coordinated efforts across the state. The main objective of this paper is to find out the changing trend of child sex ratio in Punjab and how far Punjab government initiatives are successful in improving child sex ratio in the state. The data have been collected from secondary sources like Census reports, NFHS reports, journals, newspaper articles, online links and websites. In this paper, the changing trend of child sex ratio and how much has changed in child sex ratio in 10 years from 2001 to 2011 has been analyzed. After analyzing the data obtained, it is revealed that a trend of increasing child sex ratio has been found in Punjab. The study reveal that the government has implemented different schemes from time to time for improving the sex ratio. The study highlights the achievements and gaps in the existing schemes and give suggestions for policy initiatives.

Keywords: Girl Child, Child Sex Ratio, NFHS, Census, Government Schemes

Introduction

The most important component of any Census is gender composition which is a useful demographic characteristic. A girl is not merely a gender, she is the honour of a family, the soul of society, and the pride of humanity. Even thinking of harming a girl child in the womb disturbed not just a family but the balance of the entire society. The sex ratio at birth (SRB) is the number of female live births per 1,000 male live births. A normal SRB typically ranges between 952 to 980 females per 1,000 males, as per World Health Organization standards. This biological constant is crucial for maintaining demographic balance and societal harmony. However, in Indian sub-continent there are more males than females in the population. As per 2011 census the sex ratio was 914 per 1000 males under 6 years old compared to 927 per 1000 in 2001 and 945 per 1000 in 1991. India's population has been a low and declining sex ratio since the advent of census operations. This trend brings forth female's low status and causes a serious threat to the cultural, socio-economic and ethical structures and values of Indian society. According to NFHS-5 data, Punjab's sex ratio stood at 918 females per 1000 males in 2024, which remains below the national average of 929. The paper is based on secondary sources like Census reports, NFHS reports, journals, newspaper articles, online links and websites. The objectives of paper are to study the pattern of district level of child sex ratio in Punjab and to understand the operative factors responsible for gender discrimination. The paper has made an attempt to evaluate government schemes responsible for improving sex ratio at birth and child sex ratio in Punjab and also useful suggestions that will set the ground for further policy initiatives.

Theoretical Perspective

Feminist viewpoints, especially structural feminism, interpret disparities in sex ratios as stemming from patriarchal systems that undervalue females, exemplified by practices such as female foeticide and a preference for sons. In the context of Punjab, initiatives like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao can be critiqued for attempting to challenge gender hierarchies through the promotion of female empowerment, although their top-down approach might neglect grassroots cultural resistance. This perspective underscores how state interventions attempt to negotiate power disparities within families and society.

Based on Marx and Weber's ideas, Conflict theory considers imbalanced sex ratios as results of competition for resources among class and caste groups, where marginalized populations prioritize male offspring for economic survival. Punjab's initiatives aim to address this issue by redistributing incentives (for example, Bebe Nanki Laadli Beti), yet evaluations indicate persistent conflicts between state objectives and deep-rooted inequalities. This framework is useful for analyzing policy failures within the context of the situation.

Review of Literature

One of the most alarming trends in India is that son preference, which can be a normal attribute for couples who have only girls, is accompanied by the neglect and death of millions of females through lack of medical care, improper nutrition, infanticide, and sex selective abortions (Arnold, Kishor and Roy, 2002). This trend can be seen in all sections of society including upper class.

The preference for male children is so strong in Punjab due to the existence of cultural and economic factors in the state. Das Gupta (1981) has argued that the culture of the dominant caste group in Punjab, namely the Jats, places a premium on successfully bearing and rearing sons because the prevailing patriarchal norms accord the Punjabi women a very low social status. The marriage of women into a new home isolates them from their parental home. The flow of resources is inevitably from the women's prenatal home to the husband's home and this coupled with high marriage costs makes the girls an economic liability. Women in Punjab are excluded from owning property, particularly land, and have lowest levels of participation in income generating activities. In the absence of any independent economic base, women gain power mainly through their ability to produce children, particularly sons (Dyson and Moore, 1983).

As government has assumed the role of a welfare state, need for government spending is constantly increasing, especially in developing countries. In India, after the economic reforms were introduced in 1991, presence of private sector has increased in almost every sphere but, government is nonetheless omnipresent, and rightly so when a huge population lacks basic amenities and achievement of Millennium Development Goals is still at a distance. Government spending on social sector (i.e. education, health, etc.)

is important to bring millions of people out of the state of ignorance and deficiency.

In case of Punjab, Sethi and Kaur (2014) highlighted the dismal state of affairs with regard to government spending on education, especially in post-reform period. Education expenditure as percentage of GSDP remained very low consistently for 21 years (1984-85 to 2005-06) i.e. 2.5 per cent on average. Also, share of education expenditure as percentage of government budget continuously kept on falling, from 20.3 percent in 1985-86 to 15.9 percent in 1995-96 and further to 13.2 percent in 2005-06.

Similar results were drawn by Brahmachari (2016) in a study related to fifteen large states of India, where Punjab was the only state in which ratio of actual expenditure to normative expenditure had decreased in 2007-08 (as compared to an earlier study by Rao et al. (2000) using 1997-98 data) in all the three subsectors, primary, secondary and higher; thereby indicating low importance attached to education sector by the state. There are limited studies done to assess the role of government in promoting female school education in India and specifically in Punjab, thereby making the case for present study strong.

The review of literature indicate that sex ratio of Punjab has tenacious imbalances mainly due to son preference, female foeticide, and socio-economic factors, with government schemes showing mixed effectiveness. Few studies reveal some improvements post-2011 interventions but there is need for study at grassroot to understand changes in sex ratio.

Database and Methodology

The present study is based on the secondary data obtained from the variety of authentic government sources. Some of the data is available in the published form while remaining is downloaded from the official websites of the government offices from the internet. The main sources of data are Census publications, various books, research papers in the journals, NFHS data and Statistical Abstract of Punjab.

Findings

Sex ratio of India is 940 as per Census of India 2011 that is an improvement from 933 females for every 1000 males as given by 2001 Census. Sex ratio has not been in favour of females and has shown a declining trend. Sex

ratio was 972 in 1901 and thereafter it declined continuously until 1941. There was a marginal increase of one point in 1951; however, it again declined for two consecutive decades and reached 930 in 1971. The sharpest decline of 11 points in the sex ratio was between 1961 and 1971 and it has remained around 930 in following censuses. The data of Census of 2011 showed increase of Sex Ratio to 940 that can be seen as positive development in society.

The overall sex ratio of India is dependent on the sex ratio obtained in different states and union territories and their relative weight in terms of size of population. There are significant variations in sex ratio among the states and union territories. Census of India 2011 revealed that the sex ratio among the major states varied from 877 in Haryana to 1084 in Kerala. The corresponding figure for Haryana was 861 while for Kerala it was 1058 as per Census 2001. The changes in sex ratio over time, therefore, are dependent on the changes in the ratio of the individual states and union territories and their relative share in population.

Table 1: Sex Ratio, India: 1901-2011 and Child Sex Ratio (0-6 years): 1961-2011

Census year	Sex Ratio (Females per, 1000 Males)	Sex Ratio in Age Group (0-6)
1901	972	-
1911	964	-
1921	955	-
1931	950	-
1941	945	-
1951	946	-
1961	941	976
1971	930	964
1981	934	962
1991	927	945
2001	933	927
2011	940	914

Source: Census of India 2011, Provisional Population Totals, Paper-1 of 2011

The data show that sex ratio in the 0-6 age group has declined at a much faster pace than the overall sex ratio of the country after 1981. The decreasing sex ratio in this child population is not good for society in future as it will lead to adverse sex ratio for total population in the country.

The child sex ratio (number of female children per 1000 male children in the age group of 0-6 years) depicts the attitudes and outlook towards the girl child in any society and it shows the ground realities of society. Moreover, the child sex ratio portrays the social response on female children. Sex composition of child population in contemporary period determines the future essential measures such as marriage rate, labour force, age structure, birth and deaths, migration, and replacement etc. The declining girl child population will lead to serious demographic imbalance and unfavourable social consequences.

According to Census 2011, child sex ratio of 914 is the lowest since independence declining from 927 in 2001. The increasing trend has been seen in Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Gujarat, and Tamil Nadu, Mizoram, and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, while the rate declined in the remaining 27 states and Union Territories. It was the highest in Mizoram at 971, closely followed by Meghalaya (970), while Haryana with 800 was at bottom and Punjab with 846. At the district level, Lahaul and Spiti in Himachal Pradesh had the highest child sex ratio at 1,013, while in Twang district of Arunachal Pradesh, it was 1,005. It was extremely low in Jhajjar and Mahendragarh of Haryana at 774 and 778 respectively.

The total population in Punjab is 2,77,04,236 in which 1,46,34,819 are males and 1,30,69,417 are females, resulting in an overall sex ratio of 893 which is lower than the national average of 940. Sex ratio in Punjab has increased from 876 in 2001 to 893 in 2011. The sex ratio is the highest in Hoshiarpur (962). Child sex ratio of population in the age group 0-6 years in Punjab has increased from 798 in 2001 to 846 in 2011. In Punjab, the rural sex ratio has increased by 16 points while increase in urban sex-ratio is of 23 points during 2001-2011. The child sex ratio in age group 0-6 years in rural areas of Punjab has increased by 44 points while increase in urban areas is of 55 points during this decade.

Sex ratio in child population 0-6 years is deplorably low in Punjab (846). Shahid Bhagat Singh Nagar district (formerly Nawanshahar district) has the

highest sex ratio of 879 in child population. Taran-Taran is at the bottom with a sex ratio of 819. Among the districts in the state the rural sex ratio is the highest in Hoshiarpur (974) and the lowest in SAS Nagar (868). Among the 20 districts, 12 districts recorded rural sex ratio higher and 8 districts lower than the state average. The gap in the rural-urban sex ratio is quite significant in the state; the corresponding ratio for urban and rural areas being 872 and 906 respectively. Shahid Bhagat Singh Nagar district (924) has the highest sex ratio in urban areas in the state, while it is lowest (837) in Fatehgarh Sahib. In the state, the disparity in the sex ratio of urban-rural population in the age group 0-6 is not very wide, urban (851) and rural (843). Among the districts, Jalandhar district is marked with the highest (885) sex ratio in the age group 0-6 in rural areas while Taran-Taran has the lowest (817) sex ratio in the age group 0-6 in rural areas. Kapurthala district (892) has the highest sex ratio in the age group 0-6 in urban areas while two districts Gurdaspur and Mansa have lowest (820) sex ratio in the age group 0-6 in urban area respectively.

Table 2: Child sex ratio in Punjab (2001-2011)

Sr. No.	Districts	Child Sex Ratio (2001)	Child Sex Ratio (2011)	Change in Child Sex Ratio during 2001-11
1.	Tarn Tarn	784	820	34
2.	Gurdaspur	789	821	32
3.	Amritsar	792	826	34
4.	Muktsar	811	831	20
5.	Mansa	782	836	54
6.	Patiala	776	837	61
7.	Sangrur	784	840	56
8.	SAS Nagar	785	841	56
9.	Fatehgarh Sahib	766	842	76
10.	Barnala	792	846	51

11.	Firozpur	822	847	25
12.	Faridkot	812	851	39
13.	Bhatinda	785	854	69
14.	Hoshiarpur	812	859	47
15.	Moga	818	863	63
16.	Ludhiana	817	865	48
17.	Rupnagar	799	866	66
18.	Kapurthala	785	872	87
19.	Jalandhar	806	874	68
20.	SBS Nagar	808	879	71
	Punjab	798	846	48

Source; Census Operation of Punjab

Discussion on the bases of given data, the Child Sex Ratio is lowest in Fatehgarh Sahib district (766) while the highest Child Sex Ratio is recorded in Firozpur district (822) in 2001. In 2011, the lowest Child Sex Ratio was recorded in Tarn-Taran district (820) and the Highest Child Sex Ratio was recorded in SBS Nagar district (879). From 2001 to 11, the maximum change (87) in Child Sex Ratio came in Kapurthala district where Child Sex Ratio increased from 785 to 872 and the minimum change (20) in Child Sex Ratio in Muktsar district where Child Sex Ratio increased 811 to 831.

Challenge with Sex Ratio in India

Despite improvement in the Sex ratio of India as per the NFHS 5 (2019-2021) data, there are the following persistent challenges as given below:

- **Continue Sex-Selective Practices:** Despite the improved overall sex ratio, the SRB (Sex ratio at birth) of 929 reflects ongoing son preference and sex-selective abortions.
- **Poor Enforcement of Laws:** The Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PCPNDT) Act face inconsistent enforcement. For example, Haryana's SRB dropped to 910 in 2024, an eight-year low, partly due to relaxed enforcement.

- **Regional and Urban-Rural Disparities:** Northern states (e.g., Haryana, Punjab) continue to lag behind southern states (e.g., Kerala, Tamil Nadu) due to stronger patriarchal norms.
- **Son Meta Preference:** Deep-rooted cultural beliefs favouring male children for inheritance, lineage, and economic support persist, particularly in northern and western states. This drives practices like female infanticide and neglect, impacting child-sex ratios.
- **Economic Pressures and Dowry:** Dowry practices and the perception of daughters as financial burdens exacerbate sex-selective practices, especially in economically stressed households.
- **No Census since 2011 Data Reliability Concerns:** NFHS-5's sex ratio estimates, based on a sample of 636,699 households, may overestimate female numbers due to methodological issues.
- **Social Consequences:** A skewed sex ratio leads to issues like "marriage squeeze," increased violence against women, and potential social unrest.
- **Health and Nutrition Disparities:** NFHS-5 notes higher female life expectancy (69.6 years vs. 66.4 for men in 2010–14), contributing to the overall sex ratio improvement.

Why is Punjab's Sex Ratio Still low?

- **Female Foeticide:** Despite being declared illegal under the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PC-PNDT) Act, 1994, female foeticide continues unabated due to societal preference for male children. The availability of advanced ultrasound technology has facilitated sex-selective abortions, especially in affluent households.
- **Lack of Robust Tracking System:** There is no comprehensive system to monitor pregnancies from conception to birth, making it difficult to detect cases of sex-selective abortions. Softwares like Rajasthan's 'ASHA Soft' facilitates the online payment and monitoring the performance of Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs) integrated with the state's Pregnancy, Child Tracking and Health Services Management System (PCTS),

improving follow up on pregnant women and newborns.

- **Patriarchal Social Norms:** One of the core reasons behind declining sex ratio. A deeply ingrained patriarchal value system considers daughters a financial burden (due to dowry) and sons as economic assets (for lineage continuation) and religious beliefs giving rise to rights and duties of sons. This mindset cuts across socio-economic strata, indicating that education and wealth alone do not challenge gender biases.
- **Ineffective Enforcement of the PC-PNDT Act, 1994:** Insufficient inspections of diagnostic centers and ultrasound clinics. Prosecution under the Act is slow, with low conviction rates and limited awareness among healthcare providers and the society about the Act's provisions.
- **Rising crimes against women:** This is also one of the reasons why people prefer giving birth to males. According to NCRB's 2023 report crimes against women in India registered a modest increase of 0.6% from 4,45,256 in 2022 to 4,48,211 in 2023, with a worrying 9% increase in dowry-related deaths, totalling 6,156 cases.

Improved sex ratio of Punjab is the result of the accumulated effect over the year. Several factors contribute to this positive trend in India given below:

- Government initiatives such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (Save the Daughter, Educate the Daughter) have been implemented to address the issue of the skewed sex ratio. The campaign is one such initiative to improve the sex ratio of India.
- Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PCPNDT) Act. The law was enacted in 1994 to prevent the practice of sex-selective abortions. The law imposes strict penalties on doctors and healthcare providers who engage in the practice.
- PCPNDT Act has been successful in reducing the number of sex-selective abortions in India. The law prohibits the use of technology for sex determination and sex-selective abortions.
- Increased female education and better healthcare access, especially

in rural areas, have reduced female mortality rates, which has led to a balanced sex ratio.

- Awareness campaigns and gender-sensitive education have an important role in gradually shifting societal attitudes away from son preference, particularly in states like Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh, which report higher sex ratios.
- Lower fertility rates, particularly among educated women, have reduced the pressure to have male children. The Women and Men in India 2023 report highlights a decline in the Age-Specific Fertility Rate (ASFR) in key age groups.

Various schemes launched by the Punjab State government to improve Sex Ratio:

- **Bebe Nanki Laadli Beti Kalyan Scheme:** The scheme, launched in 2011, provides financial assistance to eligible families for the education of their girl children, with payouts disbursed in stages up to the age of 18. The goal is to curb female foeticide and remove the financial burden associated with raising a girl.
- **Balri Birth Gift Scheme:** This scheme is for registered construction workers. It provides a Fixed Deposit Receipt (FDR) of ₹51,000 for the birth of up to two female children. The FDR can be encashed at the time of the daughter's marriage.
- **Mai Bhago Vidya Scheme :** The scheme , launched in 2011-12, aims to ensure that the girl's students continue their education beyond the level of primary, to promote girl's enrollment, and reduce the dropout of the girl child in the senior secondary and higher secondary school level. Under the scheme, Free bicycles are provided to all girl students of 9th to 12th classes.
- **Kanjak Sambhal:** Under this programme, free and zero expense treatment is provided to the girl child upto 5 years of age.
- **Janni Surkhiya Yojana:** Under the scheme, pregnant women below poverty line (BPL) belonging to rural areas are given a financial assistance of Rs. 700 and urban area women are given Rs. 600 if they go for institutional delivery. In case the delivery take place at home, a financial assistance of Rs. 500 is given.

Strategic Roadmap:

Although the Punjab government, along with the Centre, has launched various initiatives to improve the sex ratio, significant gaps remain that require urgent attention. Collaborating with stakeholders (government agencies, NGOs, and the private sector) to ensure that legal frameworks, institutional support, and local resources align with the campaign's goals, Track metrics (e.g., shifts in public attitudes, policy changes) to gauge campaign effectiveness, Launching awareness campaigns, Integration of Gender Equality in Education Curriculum, and strict enforcement of existing laws could notably contribute to improving the sex ratio in the coming years.

Government schemes for the girl child in Punjab, such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Sukanya Samriddhi Yojana, and various educational scholarships, focus on improving sex ratios, education, and financial security. Apart from the numerous schemes initiated and are being run by the state government Budget Proposal for 2019-20 announced a new project namely, Women's Health and Menstrual Hygiene in which sanitary napkin vending machines and incinerators were planned to be installed in 3550 government schools with estimated outlay of Rs. 2343.00 lacs. Also, Career Guidance Program for Girls were proposed wherein motivational and counselling camps were planned to be organized for girl students under Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Scheme so as to boost their self-confidence and convince them to pursue higher educational goals (GOI, 2020). No doubt these efforts have generated good results in terms of augmented female enrolments and literacy rates. While female literacy rate amplified from 50.41 per cent in 1991 to 70.7 per cent in 2011, total female school enrolments swelled by 50 per cent during 1991 and 2016, but the task is yet not completed. While these initiatives have improved maternal health and educational access, evaluations indicate challenges like poor outreach, low utilization, and high administrative burdens, limiting their overall impact.

Key Loopholes and Implementation Gaps

- **Strict Income Criteria:** Schemes like the Bebe Nanki Laadli Beti Kalyan Scheme require the family's annual income to be less than ₹30,000, verifiable by a Blue Card. This rigid cutoff may exclude some genuinely needy families whose income is marginally higher or

who lack the specific documentation.

- **Lack of Monitoring and Awareness:** A significant gap identified by studies is the lack of robust monitoring and evaluation systems for various welfare programs. This can lead to improper implementation, such as anganwadi workers not maintaining proper distribution records for items like sanitary napkins under the Udaan scheme.
- **Conditional Benefits:** Benefits for financial and attendance scholarships often depend on the girl child staying in school. If a girl drops out for any reason, the benefits are discontinued, which can be a barrier in cases of unavoidable circumstances like family issues or lack of nearby high schools.
- **Infrastructure Deficiencies:** The lack of adequate infrastructure in some rural schools, such as separate and clean toilets for girls, can discourage attendance, particularly during adolescence, effectively creating a practical "loophole" in the education-focused schemes.
- **Focus on Media Campaigns Over Implementation:** A parliamentary committee report on the central Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (BBBP) scheme (which has state-level implementation) noted that a large portion of funds was spent on media campaigns and advocacy rather than direct, on-the-ground interventions, leading to a gap in practical empowerment efforts.
- **Procedural Hurdles:** To access benefits, parents/guardians must apply using specific forms available at anganwadi centers or Child Development Project Officer (CDPO) offices. This process can be difficult for illiterate or less-informed families in remote areas who may be unaware of the application process or where to obtain the forms.
- **Documentation Issues:** The need for specific documents, such as the Blue Card for income proof or birth certificates, can be a hurdle for families without proper records, preventing them from accessing scheme benefits.
- **Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (BBBP):** Aimed at addressing declining child sex ratios, this scheme has raised awareness but requires

stronger implementation to change deep-seated gender biases.

- **Conditional Cash Transfers (CCTs):** Schemes like the *Bebe Nanaki Laadli Beti Kalyan Scheme* (aimed at providing education and financial security) have faced criticism for poor implementation, low coverage, and rigid documentation, often limiting beneficiaries to a very small number.
- **Educational Incentives:** Attendance scholarships for Scheduled Caste (SC) and Below Poverty Line (BPL) girls have encouraged enrollment, yet structural improvements in school infrastructure (separate toilets, menstrual hygiene) remain essential, as highlighted in the Gender Budget 2025-26.
- **Nutritional Support:** The Weekly Iron and Folic Acid Supplementation (WIFS) program for adolescent girls has shown gaps, with low screening rates for anemia and improper distribution records.
- As per Punjab Appraisal Report 2019-20, there was a decline of 17 per cent and 16 per cent in enrolment at primary and upper primary level respectively in 2017-18. The annual average dropout has increased in 2017-18 from previous year at all levels of school education and therefore, the transition rates have fallen. Also, there are lacunas in the implementation that need to be filled up to uphold the impetus.
- Percentage of total expenditure against anticipated amount for Samagra Shiksha was merely 52.72 per cent. According to Kainth (2013), elementary schools in rural Punjab suffer from lack of infrastructure, teaching aids, lack of funds availability and the lack of dedication among the teaching staffs and its shortage. Besides, shortage of non-teaching staff compelled teachers to undertake non-academic work and therefore, they could not fully concentrate on teaching work. Thus, there is a need for rationalization of school teachers and availability of adequate administrative and clerical staff. Such glitches need to be addressed with all seriousness because these schemes have immense potential and can work wonders in furthering female education.

The way forward:

Stringent Enforcement of Existing Laws: The Supreme Court has repeatedly directed states to vigorously enforce the PC-PNDT provisions to curb female foeticide. This includes fast-tracking cases through special courts and enhancing penalties for violations. In states like Maharashtra and Rajasthan, periodic raids on ultrasound centers and surprise inspections have significantly reduced illegal practices.

Implementation of Robust Tracking Systems for Pregnant Women: Startups employing IoT devices and data analytics (e.g., JioVio Healthcare) have demonstrated potential in monitoring maternal health parameters and identifying at-risk pregnancies. Mother and Child Tracking System (MCTS), launched by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, aims to track women from conception to postnatal care, minimizing the risk of sex-selective procedures.

Increased Accountability for Medical Professionals: Enhancing the role of State Medical Councils in revoking licenses of repeat offenders can serve as a deterrent. The Indian Medical Association (IMA) has advocated stricter mechanisms to penalize erring medical professionals, proposing more transparent investigation protocols.

Awareness Campaigns Addressing Root Causes: Government awareness drives like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) have succeeded initially. However, for maximum impact, hyper-local interventions through Panchayats, Self-Help Groups (SHGs), and NGOs should be used. Incorporating social and behavioral change communication strategies—similar to Swachh Bharat Mission techniques—creates community-driven accountability for safeguarding the girl child.

Engagement of Men and Boys: Tailor certain campaign elements specifically towards men and boys, emphasizing their role in challenging gender-based violence, redefining masculinity, and promoting inclusive social structures. Presenting men as partners and stakeholders in gender equality fosters broader cultural acceptance of reform.

Highlight Accomplishments over Physical Attributes: By focusing on capabilities and talents—rather than appearance or socially expected “strength”—societies can reduce the pressure on individuals to conform to

gender-based expectations. This applies to children and adults, steering attention toward personal achievements and potential.

Integration of Gender Equality in Education Curricula: Revisiting the National Curriculum Framework to emphasize constitutional values like Article 14 (equality before law) and Article 15(1) (prohibition of discrimination on grounds of sex) helps ingrain egalitarian values from a young age. Collaborations with organizations focusing on gender awareness in schools can bridge formal curriculum gaps.

Economic Incentives for Families with Girl Children: Conditional cash schemes linked to the birth and education of girl children have contributed to incremental improvements in child sex ratio, though gaps remain.

Conclusion

The plummeting sex ratio is not just a societal failure; it is a human rights crisis that threatens the very fabric of equity and justice. The state and society must act decisively to dismantle this toxic mindset before it corrodes the future of our daughters and our nation. To make all provided schemes successful in empowering women, it is very necessary to give her power of all three i.e. Wealth, Wisdom and strength. Government initiatives alone would not be sufficient; society must take measures to create a climate in which women have full opportunities of participating in political and social life. Women empowerment could be achieved if their economic and social status is improved. An empowered woman is more powerful to face the challenges of life; to overcome the inequalities, she can realize her full identity and powers in all spheres of life

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Daughter, Wife, Mother: A Socio-Economic Perspective from the *Therīgāthā*

PADMA LHAMO AND G.C. CHAUHAN

Abstract

The Therīgāthā preserves retrospective accounts in which elder nuns recall their lives before ordination. Drawing on these past life narratives, this study offers a comparative analysis of women's experiences across socio-economic position, contrasting, for example, girls and young women from higher class with those from lower-class. Focusing on stages of lay life (girlhood, marriage, and motherhood), it examines how class shaped education and socialisation, work and household labour, marriage arrangements and mobility, access to property and resources, exposure to vulnerability, and routes to moral authority. Through close reading, the paper highlights the heterogeneity of women's positions within early Indian society. The analysis argues that class not only structured constraints but also differentiated opportunities for agency, thereby complicating generalisations about "women" in the period and refining our understanding of gendered socio-economic life.

Keywords: *Therīgāthā*, daughter, wife, mother, social, economic, position, Theri, Bhikkhuni, Pativrata, Ganika

Introduction

A burgeoning trend in history writing is transitioning from a male-centric to a female-centric narrative. Ram Mohan Roy was the foremost to write on sati in 1918 (Jaiswal, 1981), contributing significantly to the understanding of gender in ancient Indian history. Various scholars, including Altekar, Caroline Rhys Davids, Mabel Bode, and I.B. Horner, have contributed to the historiography of women in ancient India. Subsequently, newer scholars have shifted their focus towards exploring gender issues and their narrative.

In the field of narration, Pataniak asserts that “academicians have long nurtured the orientalist narration” and he continues in terms of narratives built from Buddhist sources that “scholars exploring the Buddhist art and literature through the lens of gender and throwing light that has been unnoticed”. Nonetheless, the concept of women's history, encapsulated by Gerda Lerner's assertion that “women have a history, and women are in history,” has gained traction.

The *Therīgāthā*, dating from the sixth to third centuries BCE, is a collection of 73 verses composed by Buddhist elder nuns¹. This text offers insights into their spiritual journeys and lives. The term '*Therīgāthā*' is derived from the Pali words *therī* (meaning 'elder nun') and *gāthā* (meaning 'verse'). It recounts anecdotes from the nun's past lives and provides glimpses into their socio-economic conditions, with support from commentaries by Dhammapāla and the *Apadāna*.

While the *Therīgāthā* highlights the spiritual self-expression of women² and challenges traditional notions of ideal womanhood, it primarily features aristocratic and affluent women (Meill 2020), such as Prajāpati (the Buddha's aunt and foster mother) and others from royal, Brahmin, or merchant families. It is noteworthy that upper-caste women who attained *arahatship*³ had frequent representation in *Therīgāthā* and other Pāli texts. Despite this focus, the text also touches on the lives of lower-class women, providing a broader perspective on women's experiences in early India.

Foremost of Nun in the Sangha: The Order of Sangha primarily consisted of Bhikkhus, who faced challenges when Prajapati sought ordination (Blackstone 2000). Buddhist philosophy emphasises overcoming suffering caused by desire, and women are seen as the embodiment of desire (Paul et al. 1985) that hinders monks' spiritual progress. The ordination of women was made possible through the efforts of Ananda, the Buddha's disciple, and Prajapati. Horner noted that women joined the *saṅgha* for various personal and societal reasons⁴. Early *theris* were ordained for teaching, but later, the order became a refuge for distressed women (Falk 2001).

Therīgāthā is a collection of poems that depicts the various stages of a woman's life and sheds light on the social realities. These women included mothers, wives, widows, daughters, princesses, courtesans, and others,

reflecting the diverse social affiliations of the time (Murcott, 1991). Horner (1930) highlighted the variety of almswomen, ranging from those of royal and noble families, great merchants, Brahmins of all kinds, and women from other castes or of unknown castes, to courtesans. Feminist scholars have written about the solidarity of the sisterhood, despite differences in class, caste, and region⁵ (Chakraborty 2018).

Previous Study - The main argument centres on how the Therīgāthā provides unique insights into women and gender in early India, as explored by scholars such as Susan Murcott, Kathryn R. Blackstone, I.B. Hornor, and Kum Kum Roy. Blackstone (2000), in her *Women in the Footsteps of the Buddha: A Struggle for Liberation in the Therīgāthā* analyses female authorship, representation, and perspectives, each from differing approaches. Blackstone highlights gender and social constraints and compares male and female perspectives to show genuine female authorship. Similarly, Roy (2021) in her *Beyond Gargi and Maitreya: Exploring the their and thera Apadana* examines Apadana to address gender asymmetry within social and monastic orders, but both mainly focus on monastic institutions. In contrast, Murcott (1991) in *The First Buddhist Women: translation and commentaries on the Therigatha* emphasises the personal, emotional, and spiritual experiences of diverse women, favouring interpretation over historical analysis. Hornor (1930) in *Women Under Primitive Buddhism*, discusses domestic roles and merit-making among laywomen, offering foundational perspectives but less attention to class and women's voices. Together, these works demonstrate the varied scholarly approaches to understanding women's conditions through the lens of the Therīgāthā. This work enables multi-dimensional analysis, showing how gender, class, and social roles shaped both lived experiences and remembered legacies. This integrated approach informs the present study, which focuses on a comparative analysis of different women's lives. It traces the experiences of girls, wives, mothers, and other categories across social strata, showing how their experiences were preserved in early Buddhist texts.

Daughter – *Therīgāthā* is believed to date from the 6th to the 3rd century BCE. Hallisey notes that poems were translated from various ancient Indian

vernaculars into Pali. To understand the period in which the *Therīgāthā* was written, it is important to examine the society that existed before and during the 6th century BCE. The status of female children varied across the literature: while the *Rig Veda* and *Upanishads* celebrated the birth of learned daughters and emphasised parental love, the *Atharvaveda* and *Aitareya Brahmana* often viewed daughters as unwanted. The Satpatha Brahmana further degraded their status, associating daughters with the Shudra class and considering them a product of sinful birth.

However, *Therīgāthā* does not imply that daughters were unwanted at birth; rather, they were welcomed⁶ and valued. Isadasi's poem⁷ illustrates this, showing that she was her father's only beloved daughter. The text also reflects the deep sorrow of mothers who lose their children, regardless of gender⁸. As for the education, there is no information available about the education provided to girls in the past. However, the Brahmin tradition gave few instances of the importance of the birth of a learned daughter. In the 6th century BCE, a new economy emerged that was focused on private property and commodity production (Tharakan and Tharakan 1975). Scholars have interpreted this as being a male-centric economy that led to discrimination in many aspects, especially in their education. *Therīgāthā* does not provide much information about the education of girls, but Isadasi's poem suggests that they were taught to be good wives, daughters-in-law, and mothers. To clearly understand the statement, Isadasi's verse below elucidates the point.

‘I waited on my mother-in-law and father-in-law, Morning and night, I placed my head on their feet, I honoured them just as I had been taught’⁹

This reflects the condition of the daughter of the upper or rich section, while the lower sections were mentioned only minimally. Most of the lower sections in *Therīgāthā* were portrayed as slaves, servants, and prostitutes, with the life of a courtesan or *ganika* being frequently mentioned. The *Arthasāstra* noted that *ganikas* were educated and had to study the sixty-four arts, including singing, dancing, acting, and playing different musical instruments (Chauhan 2023). These arts were taught to young courtesans and their children, as reflected in the note explanation of *Theri Vimala*¹⁰, who continued the profession of her mother.

Therīgāthā does not explicitly mention girls' education; however, it gives

some indication regarding the degree of freedom they enjoyed. Many *theris*, joined the order as a result of Buddha's teachings, indicating that women were allowed to hear the religious discourse. The girls who joined the order did so with the permission of their parents, similar to male monks, which reflects a certain level of freedom for them.

Horner (1930) emphasised that from the 7th to the 4th century BCE, girls were accorded favourable status in society for several reasons. Religious teachings, especially those of Buddha, played a significant role, as well as the relatively prosperous economic conditions. Nevertheless, the notion of *ganika* portrayed females as commodities (Saxena 2006). This indicated that women, especially young and attractive ones, were incorporated into *dana* or *dakshina* for the gratification of men. Women are perceived as mere objects of gratification, devoid of any agency or autonomy. *Ganikas* may be the offspring of courtesans, girls who were bought or captured via warfare. In some cases, parents relinquished their daughters due to financial destitution. *Therīgāthā* predominantly highlights daughters from higher socio-economic strata. However, the inclusion of *ganikas* sheds light on the circumstances of daughters from lower strata, and provides insight into the diversity of society, indicating that women were both adorned with wealth while also being included in *Dana* and *Dakshina*.

Married Ladies: In the *Therīgāthā*, women were predominantly portrayed as wives. Murcott (1991, 75, 92) and Bhattacharji (1990) describe how being a wife and mother was a conventional role for women, with the latter being trained from a young age to fulfil these duties. Girls spent a considerable amount of time at their parents' homes. The majority of the *theris* were wed when they were young adults¹¹ between 16 to 18 years old. In some cases, due to poverty, a young girl was married off at the attainment of puberty, between the ages of 10¹² to 16¹³. Even in the time of marriage, there are instances in some poems that suggest that girls asked for their opinion or choice in choosing their spouse. Nevertheless, *Therīgāthā* indicated that there were fewer cases of pre-puberty or child marriage during that time. The concept of marriage was central to this role, with *Therīgāthā* reflecting on both polygamous and monogamous relationships, as well as endogamous and exogamous marriages

There are instances where questions of gender equality arise, particularly after marriage. Women have traditionally been influenced by the concept of '*pativratā*'¹⁴, which subordinates them to the authority of their husbands (Thapar, 2014). *Therīgāthā* illustrates a polygamous type of marital structure, where men from affluent or upper social classes practised polygamy. In contrast, women remained faithful to one husband, as illustrated in the verse about Kisagotami¹⁵. Moreover, women were required to seek permission from their husbands or wait for their husbands' death in order to be ordained into the order, while men were not subjected to such a stipulation.

Not all sections of women were depicted as ideal or *pativratā* in the anthology. The verses depicting lower and poorer women illustrate their animosity toward their husbands. For instance, the wife of a basket maker¹⁶ expressed her hatred towards her husband and how she felt free from the cooking pot and her husband, which she found loathsome. A poor woman named Mutta¹⁷ similarly expressed herself as free from 'three crooked things': mortar, pestle, and her crooked husband. Blackstone (2000), in her commentaries, writes and directs towards the verse of Theris' outro line that is 'O free am I! O glorious free am I! So sit upon the rock. And o'er my spirit sweeps'. She noted that the *theris* implication on freedom from the societal norms and often these women were emancipated from mental, moral, domestic, and social suffering. The percentage of *theri* that focus on emancipation and liberty won is higher than that of the *theras* or monks. Although the *theri* emphasis on gaining spiritual awakening, as well as their societal role, also seems to affect them, many of the outro of their verse ended with the freedom they gained, as they refer to.

The expression of freedom was associated with the possibility of divorce or dissolution of marriage. The prevalence of *Pativratā* had impacted their societal roles, and divorce was not frowned upon. *Therīgāthā* reflected the adversities women faced in marriage, including divorce. Isadasi's verses reflect upon her own experiences of getting married twice and being forced to divorce both times due to her husband's preferences. The notion of *pativratā* women was applied to all women, regardless of their circumstances. This was evident in the cases of Sungmala's mother and

Mutta, who belonged to the poorer sections of society and expressed their unhappiness in their marriages. Perhaps their decision to join the sangha was an attempt to escape their unhappy married lives. It appears difficult for women to get a divorce from their husbands, whereas men have the freedom to leave their wives or even have multiple wives.

Many women struggle to escape marriage, as illustrated by Kisagotami's story. Coming from a poor family, she married a wealthy merchant who treated her poorly, but having a child changed her circumstances and highlighted the significance of women as "mothers." Murcott notes that being a wife and mother is a conventional role, while Bhattacharji (1990, 50) points out that girls were traditionally trained for this role, finding fulfilment in motherhood. *Therīgāthā* poetry expresses the grief and pain of women, particularly due to child loss, with some experiencing such despair that they lose their sanity. However, some *Theris* chose to leave their children to ordain, challenging societal norms about motherhood.

The poem of *Therīgāthā* sheds light on the complexity of society and its role. Although there are many written laws and expected roles for women, *Therīgāthā* highlights that society cannot be examined as one-dimensional. Particular roles may be assigned to those who make it fashionable, but they are not very universal.

Economic situation of women - Therīgāthā depicts the Gangetic region of present-day India after the Aryans moved east and settled in the Gangetic region. Scholars note that the Aryans were a patriarchal society and that women did not have favourable economic opportunities, as they were not supposed to work outside of the household. *Dharmasastras*, which detail the lives of women during that time, illustrate that women were subject to the care of men in every aspect of their lives. The *Taittiriya Samhita* and *Satapatha Brahmana* state that women did not have the right to hold property, but they did own *stridhanas*, which were their sole property. However, it is important to note that not all traditions were negative towards women in the economy. There were variations in property ownership, and even with *stridhan*, the law was sometimes written and expressed differently, as noted by Bhattacharji (1991).

According to Meil (2020, *Therīgāthā* reflects the less diversified nature of

women and gives a glimpse into the lifestyles of women in higher castes. Many upper-caste *theris* recount their previous lives as laywomen and are depicted as being adorned with fine muslin, silk, make-up, perfume, and jewellery made of gold and precious stones, which accounts for their lavish lifestyle. *Therīgāthā* sheds light on the rights of a daughter to hold property notified from the verse of Sundari¹⁸ indicating that after the death of her brother and father, who had been ordained into the sangha, her mother says, "Sundari, your father has gone forth, leaving behind elephants, cows, and horses, jewels, and earrings, and all the riches of this house. You are the heir in the family, now you can enjoy this wealth." Many of *theri* verses expressed that they abandoned slaves, workers, prosperous fields, and delightful, enticing possessions. Similarly, *theris* who were previously lay followers, used to give alms and donate to Buddha's sangha, which gave the idea that girls held certain possessions that could be used as they wanted. In the case of Sundari becoming heir only after the male heir apparent, she can hold property only in the absence of a brother in the family.

It is often known that married women own *Stridhan* or women's property. However, there is a story of a nun named Bahuputtika¹⁹ who was a widow and still retained control over her property after her husband's death. She decided to give her property to her son on the condition that he takes care of her. This story demonstrates that it was possible for women to maintain control over their property even after their husbands' deaths. Bhattacharji (1991) concluded that society did not strictly follow scriptures, but some women, particularly those from royal or noble families, could make gifts due to their wealth. Parallel laws existed, especially in matriarchal regions. Gifts from women, saints, wives, widows, or courtesans were not always taken literally, and some generous husbands encouraged such expenditure.

On the contrary, *Therīgāthā* reflected the condition of lower-section women. These women were often depicted as maidservants, nurses, and domestic slaves attached to rich women. They were depicted as earning or working women, and the poems shed light on their social situation. In anecdote explanation, Khujjattara²⁰, a slave girl who works in a wealthy household earns four coins for her work. In another verse, Punnika²¹ writes about being a water carrier. It cannot be denied that women from the lower

sections were less depicted in comparison to the higher or richer classes of women, which limits the whole idea of the exact condition of women from the lower sections. It is always known that women, even in higher or lower status, were placed beside the shudra, so for the lawmaker, she has been marginalised regardless of any status.

Therīgāthā includes many references to women as courtesans. In a society that valued chastity, ironically, certain women were recognised as public women, referred to by terms such as *ganika*, *rupajiva*, and *veshya*. These texts highlight the luxurious lives of courtesans such as Addhkasi and Ambapali, who were renowned for their beauty and skill. Bhattacharji notes that prostitution dates back to the Vedic age, with various classes, the highest being the *ganika*, who was trained in the arts at the state's expense and charged the most. Addhkasi verse reflects this by stating, "In all of the Kasi countryside, my fee was equal to that. Having set that price, the town regarded me as priceless."²² Ambapali is celebrated for donating a mango grove to the Buddha, indicating that a *ganika* could own property and have control over it.

Ironically, society contains two types of women: those who follow the ideal of *pativratā* and those who do not. In the law books, women were limited in their rights and were supposed to follow the *pativratā* ideal, which is the total devotion of a woman towards her husband. In contrast, men could marry multiple women and engage with courtesans without similar restrictions. The presence of *ganika* (courtesans) raises questions about *pativratā*. These women highlight the patriarchal nature of society, where some women serve under men's authority, while others are expected to provide pleasure. While *Ganika* often received respect and state protection, as noted in the Arthaśāstra (Chauhan 2023), they also reflect the struggles of marginalised women forced into this work by circumstance. Ultimately, societal expectations are not universally applicable, and significant socioeconomic disparities reveal a complex narrative that literature alone cannot fully capture.

In conclusion, *Therigatha* provides a nuanced depiction of women's lives in ancient Indian society, reflecting diverse experiences such as those of daughters, wives, mothers, and courtesans across different castes and social

statuses. While primarily focused on the spiritual attainments of the *theris* (senior Buddhist nuns), the anthology, along with commentaries by Dhammapala and *Apadana*, offers valuable insights into the socio-economic and cultural circumstances of the time. The male-dominated society portrayed in the *Therīgatha* imposed norms and restrictions on women that did not apply to men. However, the complexity of societal norms allowed for deviations in certain contexts, demonstrating that women's roles and status were not uniform or linear but shaped by varied socio-economic and geographical factors. Romila Thapar emphasised that women in Indian history cannot be seen as a homogeneous group, nor can their lives be understood solely through the lens of normative texts. *Therīgatha* captures the multi-faceted nature of women's lives, illustrating their diverse experiences, struggles, and achievements, while resisting generalisations about their roles and circumstances.

Endnotes

- ¹ Charles Hallisey, trans., *Therīgāthā - Poems of the First Buddhist Women*, Murty Classical Library of India, Cambridge, 2015 (hereafter as *Therīgāthā*).
- ² *Therīgāthā* verse 61, p.45. Nun named Soma verse 'what does being women have to do with it? What count is that heart is settled, and that one sees what really is'
- ³ In the Pali canon, the term *Arahat* refers to one who has attained the true goal and ended the cycle of birth and rebirth. Sometimes it is synonymous with *Tathagata*.
- ⁴ *Theri Isadasi*, Sungmala's mother, *Patachara*, *Abhirupanada*, *Mutta* were example who ordain due to personal reason rather than Buddha's teaching.
- ⁵ *Therīgāthā* verse 285.147. *Rohini* verse "This who have gone forth, are from various families and from various regions, and still, they are friendly with each other- that is the reason why, ascetics are so dear to me."
- ⁶ *Therīgāthā*, 7.255- King of Kosala and *Ubbiri* was happy due to birth of daughter
- ⁷ *Therīgāthā*, 408.199
- ⁸ *Therīgāthā*, 51.255

- ⁹ Therīgāthā, 410.199
- ¹⁰ Therīgāthā, 4.257
- ¹¹ Most of the nuns are described as young adults living with their parents.
- ¹² Therīgāthā, 9.250
- ¹³ Therīgāthā, 448.209
- ¹⁴ Thapar highlighted that description of ideal women, the Pativrata- the one devoted to her husband in accordance to Dharmasastras.
- ¹⁶ Therīgāthā, 217.113
- ¹⁶ Therighata, 23.21
- ¹⁷ Therīgāthā, 11.11
- ¹⁸ Therīgāthā, 329.167
- ¹⁹ Nun Bahuputtika was not mentioned in Therīgāthā but mentioned in the story of the Dammapada commentaries inserted by Murcott. See, Susan Murcott. *The First Buddhist Women: Translations and Commentaries on the Therīgāthā*, 199, p.115.
- ²⁰ Murcott gives a detailed account of the life of theri Samavati and Sama in verse three in Therīgāthā. See, Susan Murcott. *The First Buddhist Women: Translations and Commentaries on the Therīgāthā*, 1991, p.142.
- ²¹ Therīgāthā, 246.123
- ²² Therīgāthā, 25.23

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Breakdown of the Interplay between Soil and Chemical Fertilizers: An Analysis of Natural Farming in Hill State of Himachal Pradesh

DIXITA THAKUR

Abstract

The global population is growing rapidly. In order to address the growing need for food, agricultural practices has involved the expansion of cropland areas which has further led to pressure on soil and an increase in intensified use of fertilizers. Soil performs crucial ecological functions that are essential for the maintenance and continuation of life. On the other hand fertilizers have a significant role in modern agriculture. As per the FAO, chemical fertilizers are the primary factor responsible for the increase in global agricultural productivity. Their use has markedly increased since the onset of the so-called green revolution. It not only boosted crop yield but also altered the physicochemical and biological properties of the soil. This results in soil compaction, reduces soil fertility, contaminates air and water, and depletes vital soil nutrients and minerals, thereby creating environmental hazards. Maintaining soil health is essential for safeguarding biodiversity and promoting sustainable agricultural output. This research highlights the crucial relationship between soil health and fertiliser use. The paper is inspired from secondary sources which consist of government documents, journals, articles and various field studies.

Keywords: Soil, Fertilizers, Sustainable Agriculture, Green Revolution, Environment, Natural Farming

Introduction

The humanity has shaped this planet from wild habitats to farmland. Globally 10% land area is covered by glaciers, 14% by deserts and barren land, and rest of the land is called habitable land on the planet. In this habitable land 48 million square kilometres is used for agricultural land

which is almost half of the habitable land. One-third of the agricultural land is used as crop lands and rest of the two-third of this is used as grazing land. Further, the direct consumption of crops by humans is only from half of the world's crop lands which accounts for 16% (Ritchie & Roser, 2024).

The human society has made giant strides over the centuries in terms of technology, urbanization and innovation. The population dynamics have also changed and will witness more changes in the coming years. By 2050, the population of the world is projected to rise to 10 billion which would stimulate agricultural demand as well. South Asia and Africa are the two regions where concentration of population is estimated to be the maximum which is 9 billion people (FAO, 2017). The acceleration in the population growth has escalated the pressure on food production. This expeditious growth has led to an increase in demand for the basic amenities such as food, water, energy, education, hygiene and health care facilities (Ducker, 2022).

Agriculture

Agriculture is the process of developing natural resources in order to support human life and generate economic benefits. Agriculture is the scientific practice of cultivating soil, producing crops, and rearing livestock.

According to the 2013 report by the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), over 60 percent of the global population relies on agriculture. Enhancing agricultural development is a very effective strategy to eradicate extreme poverty, promote inclusive economic growth, and ensure food security for the estimated population of 10 billion individuals by the year 2050. According to the World Bank Report (2020), the agriculture sector has a significantly greater impact on increasing incomes among the poorest compared to other sectors, with a growth rate that is two to four times more effective. Agriculture accounts for over 25% of the total worldwide workforce, with over 50% in sub-Saharan Africa and nearly 60% in low-income countries.

Soil Health

Soil health refers to the ability of soil to support plant and animal life, increase or maintain water and air quality, and function as an essential living system within the constraints of ecosystems and land-use boundaries. As a

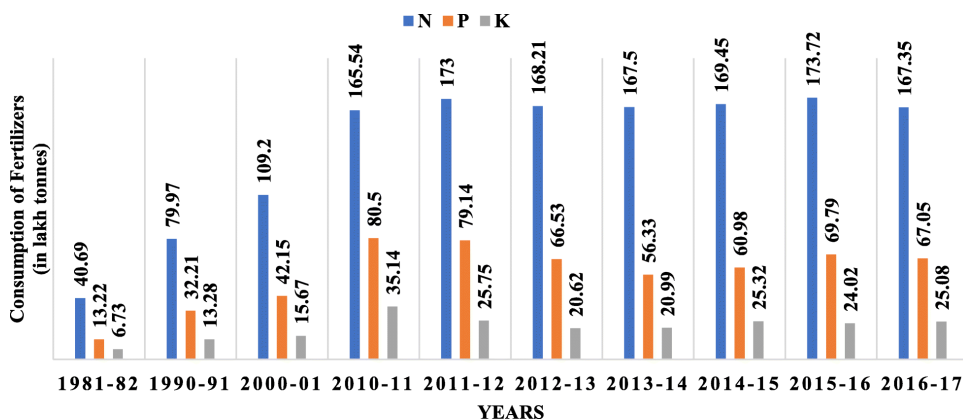
result of increased demand from a growing population, agricultural soils must be able to continue producing enough food, fiber, and energy without compromising their nutrient balance, health, or functionality. However, the improper application of mineral fertilizers, specifically excessive or insufficient use of nitrogenous and phosphate fertilizers, has significantly hindered the productivity of soils. This is evident not only through chemical indicators but also through physical and biological observations. Improper fertilizer techniques can adversely impact soil health and the ecosystem services associated with soil. Excessive use of chemical fertilizers can disrupt the balance of soil pH, leading to increased vulnerability to pests, acidification, and the formation of a hard crust on the soil surface. This can cause a decline in soil organic carbon and beneficial organisms, resulting in stunted plant development and reduced crop output. Additionally, it can potentially contribute to the release of greenhouse gases (Krasilnikov et al., 2022).

Green Revolution

The term ‘green revolution’ is coined by William S. Gaud in 1968, the administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). He introduced new technologies and policies to increase production and productivity of food crops (Nelson et al., 2019). In the Indian frame of reference, this concept was implemented in 1965 by M.S. Swaminathan, popularly known as “Father of green revolution in India”. It was introduced during the period when India was facing food shortage. The policy was applied to provide self-sufficiency to the country in the production of food grains to prevent it from famines and decrease dependence on foreign aid. It increased the food production in the country (Stepha, 2022).

The utilization of fertilizers significantly expanded since the beginning of the green revolution. It aimed to increase farm production mainly by using high-yield plant varieties instead of traditional ones, applying fertilisers and pesticides, improving irrigation with large investments in extensive systems, and combining smaller farms into larger ones. (Sebby, n.d.) The monocropping system, along with the heightened and frequent application of fertilisers and pesticides, inflicted significant harm on the soil's biological functions, diminished crop diversity, escalated cultivation costs, degraded groundwater quality, resulted in the loss of flora and fauna,

heightened human diseases, contributed to malnutrition, and reduced soil fertility. (Nelson et al., 2019). Following are the side-effects of Green Revolution:



SOURCE: (Nelson et al., 2019)

CONSUMPTION OF FERTILIZERS: NITROGEN, PHOSPHORUS and POTASSIUM (N, P, AND K) POST-GREEN REVOLUTION PERIOD

The consumption of N, P, and K fertilizers increased steadily post-Green Revolution era. In particular, the period after 2000–2001 saw increased consumption of inorganic fertilizers, as the application of inorganic fertilizers influenced crop yield. Nitrogen-based fertilizers such as urea, ammonia, and nitrate were widely used. The uncontrolled use of these N, P, and K adversely affected the fertility of the soil and altered the micro biota of the soil.

Chemical fertilizers are available in many types, including nitrogenous, phosphate, and potassium fertilizers. The application of fertilizers not only increases crop yield, but also alters the physicochemical and biological properties of the soil. However, the growing and continuous use of chemical fertilizers is responsible for the decline in levels of soil organic matter (SOM), resulting in a degradation of agricultural soil quality. Prolonged and excessive use of chemical fertilizer can disturb the pH equilibrium of soil, resulting in heightened insect activity, acidification, and the production of a compacted crust on the soil surface. Consequently, this diminishes the quantity of organic matter and humus in the soil, impairs the existence of

advantageous organisms, obstructs plant growth, and may even contribute to the emission of greenhouse gases. The continued presence of these elements in the soil would surely disturb soil health and damage soil biodiversity (Iqbal et al.2020).

Following India's independence, the Green Revolution emerged as a very influential movement that facilitated the advancement of high yielding cultivars through the implementation of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. There is a pressing need to resuscitate our traditional hill agriculture system by transitioning from chemical-based farming to organic farming in this mountainous region. This would provide both environmental and nutritional security (Himachal Pradesh State Biodiversity Board, 2018).

The intensification of conventional farming methods has resulted in widespread use of agrochemicals, agricultural technology, and high-yield cultivars, leading to detrimental environmental effects, including groundwater pollution and air contamination that exacerbates the greenhouse effect. Environmental pressure adversely impacts human health, natural resources, and the sustainability of agricultural output. Moreover, agricultural land is shrinking, presenting a greater risk to the global ecology and soil resources. The hazards encompass biodiversity loss, desertification, climate change, and environmental pollution of soil, air, water, and food. The use of synthetic agricultural chemicals adversely affects human health, as residues from these substances applied to crops ultimately enter the digestive systems of consumers. (Choudhary et al., 2022)

Natural Farming

Padma Shree awardee Subhash Palekar, famously known as “Krishi ka Rishi” (*sage of agriculture*) developed the concept of natural farming. He realized that the impact of toxic chemicals promoted by green revolution has damaged the long term fertility of the soil and affected the farm productivity. Therefore, Palekar aimed for an alternative to this situation. After much experimentation he found that the local seeds, cow breeds and soil can be used in the self-sustaining no-cost method (Niti Aayog, 2021). According to the government's Economic Survey (2021), the goal of natural farming is to eradicate the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, which contribute to environmental pollution.

Natural farming is an ecological approach to farming that involves working with the natural biodiversity and promoting the biological activity of the soil. It also involves regulating the intricate interactions between living organisms, including plants and animals, in order to promote both their well-being and food production (Niti Aayog, 2021). The components of Natural farming are as follows:

- **BEEJAMRIT**- It is an ancient practice of sustainable agriculture. It is used for seeds, seedlings, or other planting materials. It effectively safeguards new roots against fungal infections.
- **JIVAMRIT** –. Beejamrit is a fermented microbial solution, with loads of plant-beneficial microbes, and is applied as a seed treatment. The process uses cow dung, urine, and lime-based formulations.
- **MULCHING** – It is the method of safeguarding the soil surface by using both living crops and straw (decomposed plant debris) to conserve moisture, lower soil temperature around plant roots, avert soil erosion, reduce runoff, and inhibit weed proliferation
- **WHAPASA**- It denotes the amalgamation of 50% ambient air and 50% water vapour in the interstitial space between two soil particles. Soil organisms and roots mostly depend on the soil's microenvironment for moisture and some nutrients. It enhances water availability, optimises water consumption efficiency, and strengthens resilience to drought.

Some of the universal key principles of Natural Farming are:

- An intact and thriving soil micro biome is essential for achieving optimal soil health, which in turn directly impacts plant health, animal health, and ultimately human health.
- It is recommended that the soil in a farm or a group of fields should be cultivated with a variety of crops, with a minimum of 8 different crops throughout the year. Greater diversity yields superior outcomes.
- It is crucial to minimize soil disturbance, so it is recommended to practice no till farming or shallow tillage.
- The soil micro biome plays a crucial role in preserving and improving soil organic matter. Bio stimulants are essential for accelerating this process. Various methods exist for producing bio stimulants. In India, the prevailing bio-stimulants are derived from the fermentation of

animal excrement and urine, as well as uncontaminated soil.

- Enhancing the quantity and variety of organic wastes that are reintroduced into the soil is of utmost significance. These examples encompass crop waste, cow-dung, compost, and other similar materials.

A significant advantage of natural farming is its beneficial effect on soil health, since it fosters heterotrophic microbial development and enhances soil organic matter, both essential for sustained productivity. (Divyanshu et al., 2025).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Metabolic Rift Theory (Marxist Environmental Sociology)

The Metabolic Rift Theory, advanced by John Bellamy Foster and rooted in Karl Marx's writings, talks about the cyclical connection between humans and the environment induced by capitalist production. It asserts that capitalism's pursuit of profit and urban-focused expansion leads to ecological problems by uprooting resources (such as soil nutrients) without return, resulting in environmental degradation. Foster contends that capitalism engenders a 'rift' by disrupting the fundamental metabolic relationship between human society and the environment, specifically the cycle wherein nutrients extracted from the soil must be replenished after consumption. This divide is the primary origin of the contemporary ecological problem (soil degradation, urban garbage build up) and humanity's alienation from nature and labour. (Akkuş, 2026)

The Metabolic Rift idea elucidates how artificial fertilisers replace natural soil regeneration, disrupting the organic connection among soil, farmers, and the ecosystem. This theory explains soil nutrient depletion resulting from external inputs in hill agriculture, reliance on chemical fertilisers, and the resurgence of natural farming as a remedial strategy. The transition to natural farming in Himachal Pradesh can be viewed as ecological restoration, aimed at rehabilitating the disrupted soil-society metabolism.

Agroecology

Agro ecology is defined as a social-ecological framework that investigates the influence of soil ecology, farmer knowledge, institutions, markets, and power dynamics on agricultural practices. In contrast to traditional

agronomy, agro ecology clearly incorporates ecological processes with social structure, establishing it as a crucial theoretical framework within environmental sociology and rural sociology. From an agro ecological sociological viewpoint, chemical fertilisers modify the soil's social metabolism. They substitute biological nutrient cycles with externally regulated inputs, converting soil from a functioning ecosystem into a controlled substrate. This process diminishes soil biodiversity, alters microbial activity, and heightens farmers' reliance on market-driven inputs. (Altieri & Nicholis, 2005)

ZBNF is an agro ecological movement advocating a return to agricultural swaraj (self-rule) and the resurrection of distinctly Indian agronomic knowledge and practices, aimed at reclaiming farmland for the benefit of peasants. It has scaled agro ecology in India, establishing it as one of the most successful agro ecological movements worldwide. (Fitzpatrick et al., 2022)

Natural Farming in Himachal Pradesh

Known as Dev Bhoomi, or the home of Gods, Himachal Pradesh is in the Western Himalayas of India. It is a region in the northern plains of the nation. The state is agrarian, with 76% of its inhabitants reliant on agriculture for their living, contributing around 9.4% to the state's overall GDP. The state's geography renders it appropriate for the growth of a diverse array of food crops, including grains, vegetables, and medicinal and aromatic plants, as well as fruit crops, contingent upon their ecological adaptation. The newly seeded area of Himachal Pradesh is 538,412 hectares, whereas the overall cropped area is 940,597 hectares. The total irrigated area is 7 million hectares (Government of Himachal Pradesh, 2024).

The cultivation of natural farming is being encouraged by the state-operated Prakritik Krishi Khushhal Kisan Yojana, which was initiated in 2018. According to the official data, a total of 1,68,000 farmers have implemented this approach on 9,388 hectares of land, with 90,000 of them being women farmers. The primary motive for embracing Natural Farming is to guarantee food security and achieve higher productivity while utilizing fewer resources. This implies that farmers need not buy fertilizers and pesticides in order to guarantee the robust development of crops. Natural farming incurs significantly lower expenses and production costs in comparison to conventional farming.

Natural farming enhances Dehydrogenase enzyme activity. The aforementioned enzyme directly enhances soil quality. It was found that Subhash Palekar Natural Farming (SPNF) has higher dehydrogenase activity (DHA) than chemical and organic farming. This means that the soil quality seems to have gotten better after crops were grown. Also, it was observed that alkaline phosphatase and acid phosphatase enzymes worked better in natural farming than in chemical and organic farming. As a result, the SPNF approach has enhanced soil fertility by increasing enzyme activity.

A survey of three blocks in Solan District, Himachal Pradesh, was executed during 2020-2021 to evaluate soil quality and plant nutrient composition under Zero Budget Natural Farming (ZBNF) and traditional agricultural practices. Thirty representative surface soil and plant samples were taken. Fifteen was sourced from each agricultural system (conventional and ZBNF), were collected and examined from farmers' fields utilising ZBNF and conventional methods within the same block. N, P, and K demonstrated increases of 5.21%, 14.69%, and 10.27%, respectively, in conventional farming compared to the ZBNF farming approach.. (Pathania et al., 2024)

The SPNF approach resulted in a higher population of indigenous earthworm species. High-density apple orchards that employed natural farming practices exhibited the largest population of earthworms. It was identified that there are almost thirty-two earthworms per square foot in the 0–15 cm soil depth. This earthworm species significantly enhances soil health and quality, enriching it with nutrients such as nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium. The earthworm casting is made up of bacteria, enzymes, degraded plant matter, earthworm cocoons, and the excrement of animals and other organisms, which forms an organic combination. Earthworm castings provide a concentrated source of soluble plant nutrients in accessible form, surpassing the typical humus found in the upper soil layer.

A significant differentiation between Natural Farming and Chemical Farming is related to illness treatment, in which chemical farming depends on the regular application of synthetic pesticides to attain short-term control and reduce immediate disease prevalence. This chemical usage frequently results in the emergence of resistance in diseases and disturbs the equilibrium of advantageous soil and plant-associated microorganisms. On

the contrary, natural farming avoids manufactured chemicals and prioritises ecological equilibrium and biological management. It advocates for the use of indigenous bio-pesticide formulations, such as Neemaster, Agniaster, and Bramhaster, which are sourced from natural origins and are ecologically safe. This holistic strategy enhances crop health and fosters a more resilient and self-sustaining agro ecosystem. (Divyanshu et al., 2025)

Even in the freezing desert region of the state, the SPNF has successfully maintained 1.5-7.8 percent higher soil moisture levels compared to chemical and organic farming methods.

After one year of cultivating pea and tomato crops using SPNF methodology, nitrogen availability in the soil rose from 329 kilograms per hectare to 358 kilograms per hectare.

The comparative analysis of NF and CF demonstrated distinct disparities in agronomic methodologies, ecological results, and economic feasibility. NF advocated for varied farming systems and enhanced soil health by augmenting organic matter content and ensuring balanced nutrient availability. Despite a marginally increased pest occurrence during the first shift from chemical to ecological pest management, NF systems demonstrated reduced disease severity and enhanced system resilience. Natural farming techniques decreased input expenses and enhanced net profits, illustrating their viability as a sustainable option for apple farming. The research revealed organic matter and microbial activity as essential factors in profitability. These findings advocate the formulation of region-specific natural farming techniques that improve ecological processes and improve long-term soil and economic vitality (Divyanshu et al., 2025)

Yellow rust is a significant affliction in wheat cultivation. It rapidly disseminated over the northern portion of the nation over a decade, doing significant harm to the crops. Himachal Pradesh was similarly affected. Chemical agriculture proved ineffective in managing this illness. A farmer from the Bilaspur Sadar development block, Budhi Ram, asserted that the natural farming approach had successfully mitigated illness on his field. Other farmers were notably astonished by the results and subsequently attracted towards natural farming.

In Himachal Pradesh, natural farming serves as an exemplary model for

sustainable agriculture, showcasing how ecological methods can enhance soil fertility, bolster farmer incomes, and contribute to wider environmental and social objectives.

Conclusion

The continuous use of chemical fertilizers has detrimental impacts on the organic composition of the soil. The implications of these events include a potential decline in agricultural output as well as a fall in groundwater levels, loss of soil fertility, loss of biological diversity, and other agronomic issues such as water logging, salinity, and alkalinity. In order to preserve the equilibrium between productivity and ecology, the state of Himachal Pradesh implemented the policy of Natural Farming. The use of natural farming techniques in Himachal Pradesh has resulted in significant enhancements in soil quality. The main advantages include heightened activity of soil micro biota, elevated levels of soil organic matter, and enhanced soil structure and fertility. Furthermore, the state's implementation of natural farming techniques has demonstrated the ability to decrease cultivation expenses and enhance farmers' earnings by reducing reliance on costly chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Not only has this provided economic benefits for farmers, but it has also contributed to environmental preservation and public health by decreasing the presence of chemical residues in food and water.

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Lived Experiences of Social Support among Married Women Experiencing Infertility

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Abstract

Millions of couples in India are affected by infertility with far reaching socio-cultural consequences, especially in North Indian societies where bearing children is the core of humanising women and their marriage. The present qualitative research study was conducted on social support systems in Hisar, Haryana, among married women who are facing infertility with a particular focus on discussing social support systems among married women, such as partner support, family support, and community pressures. The qualitative descriptive method was used. Purposive sampling was used to recruit twenty married women who were infertile and were recruited using healthcare facilities in the Hisar district. Partner support, family dynamics, and community attitudes were investigated in in-depth interviews. Thematic analysis was conducted in the data analysis. Social support systems, including partner support experiences, family support and pressures, and community attitudes and social stigma. Patients had to deal with infertility in difficult interactions of patriarchal family systems, financial restrictions, and strong social stigma, and had to navigate diverse systems of social support, both supportive and hostile. Social support systems that are deeply rooted in the cultural contexts of the North Indian society of patriarchy, son preference and joint families are very influential in the experience of infertility in Hisar. The healthcare providers are advised to utilise culturally sensitive and family-inclusive practices, social stigma, but capitalise on support structures in place, especially on supportive partners and natal families.

Keywords: infertility, social support, stigma, partner support, family dynamics.

1. INTRODUCTION

The inability to conceive after 12 months of unprotected sexual activity is called infertility and it has been estimated to affect about 48 million couples throughout the world (Mascarenhas et al., 2012). The infertility rates in India vary between 3.9 percent and 16.8 percent with wide geographical differences and high rates in the northern states (Ganguly and Unisa, 2010). In addition to its medical aspect, infertility has very far reaching social and psychological implications especially in an environment where giving birth is the core of who women are, the stability of their marriages, and societal acceptance (Dyer et al., 2004).

The infertility in North India and especially in Haryana is in family units that are strictly patriarchal with strong rates of son preference, joint families and strict gender roles (Chowdhry, 2007). The social status of women and their acceptance in marital families is directly linked with their fertility, and therefore, infertility is an issue that has led to high levels of stigma, social seclusion and mental suffering (Riessman, 2000). Pressure to have children, specifically sons to carry the family name causes great strain between couples, and the women are normally the ones who get the greater burden of the responsibility and social repercussions of not having children (Patel, 2007). The social support, including emotional, instrumental, and informational help of partners, family members, friends and community, is a very important factor in the process of coping with infertility (Greil et al., 2010). Nonetheless, the character and quality of social support that infertile couples receive is different and depends significantly on the cultural context and is informed by existing gender patterns, family patterns, and reproduction beliefs.

1.1 Social Support and Infertility in North India

Social support to infertile women is complicated and contradictory in the context of North India. Some women have been able to get emotional and practical support from their husbands and natal families, some have been subjected to blame, taunts, and social exclusion by the in-laws and community members (Unisa, 1999). A joint family system that, at least in theory, offers a web of support, may also turn into a pressure and monitoring force, as several family members will be present in keeping track of the reproductive activity of the couple, and will be disappointed by the lack of

a child (Inhorn, 2012).

The support of the partner is especially important, as the support of a husband may prevent the impact of family and community pressures and help access treatment (Dyer et al., 2016). Nevertheless, in societies characterised by patriarchy in which men hold supreme power, husbands can also lead to the plight of women by accusing them of infertility, declining to take tests or even showing favour to the views of their families over the needs of their wives (Riessman, 2000). The dynamics of partner support and the ways in which this concept interacts with greater family and community dynamics need to be understood so that the interventions can be designed effectively.

1.2 Social Support and Infertility: An International Perspective

Infertility has been recently identified as one of the major and pervasive reproductive health problems throughout the world with strong socio-cultural and psychological underpinnings in various societies. This means that infertility affects about 186 million individuals worldwide, most of whom are found in the developing regions, thus it is disproportionately high in these regions (Inhorn & Patrizio, 2015). As a matter of fact, infertility rates in some regions of the world, such as South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, and Central and Eastern Europe, can go up to 30% meaning that it is very prevalent (Mascarenhas et al., 2012). Child bearing is regarded as being a social necessity in many developing cultures; child bearing in Iran is viewed as a necessity of married women and childlessness is stigmatised to the point that childless families are called a “*cold stove*” in Iran. Religious and legal systems legitimise these norms because even infertility can be used as a ground to justify divorce according to the Iranian Family Protection Law (Abbasi et al., 2005). Likewise, infertile women in Pakistan usually suffer brutally in society with 23.1% getting battered by husbands as well as relatives (Sami & Ali, 2012). The other significant aspect of infertility is psychological distress as Sri Lanka reported that 66.1% of infertile women were experiencing distress as compared to 18.6% of fertile women (Lansakara et al., 2011). Financial strain also contributes to this distress in India, with the female participants in the study who were in depression and anxiety also reporting substantial economic costs related to infertility treatment (Dadhwai et al., 2022).

Infertile women are discriminated against, they feel ashamed, and they face high pressure to have a child, which leads to a greater degree of depression in China (Li et al., 2017). On top of this, biological influences like age of conception also form a decisive factor that adversely impacts the results of fertility along with other parts of the world (Hart, 2016). Taken altogether, these studies shows that infertility is not only a medical illness but a complicated worldwide issue that is developed based on the overlapping cultural constructs, gender roles, financial issues, and psychological effects.

2. METHODS

A qualitative descriptive research method was used in this study, and it is specifically effective in investigating and describing phenomena of which little is known as well as those that capture the views and experiences of the participants in their own words (Sandelowski, 2000; Sandelowski, 2010). Qualitative description enables the researcher to remain in close proximity to the data and to the language of the participants and also gives a detailed rich description of experiences and meanings.

2.1 Study Objectives

This study had two specific objectives:

Objective 1: To examine the nature and forms of social support particularly partner and family support among married women experiencing infertility.

Objective 2: To explore the influence of community expectations and social pressures on the social support experiences of women dealing with infertility.

2.2 Inclusion Criteria

Participants were eligible for inclusion if they:

- Were married women aged 18-45 years
- Had taken medical treatment for difficulty in conceiving after 12 months of regular unprotected intercourse
- Provided oral or written informed consent to participate.

2.3 Recruitment and Sampling

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling from healthcare facilities in Hisar district. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure diversity in participants' demographic characteristics, infertility duration

and family structures. Healthcare providers at these facilities identified potential participants who met the inclusion criteria. Those who expressed interest and provided oral or written informed consent were enrolled.

Recruitment continued until primary data saturation was achieved that is, until no new themes or insights emerged from additional interviews. Confidentiality was maintained by using respondent numbers rather than names in all data collection, analysis, and reporting.

2.4 Sample Description

The last sample was composed of 20 infertile married women. The age of the female participants ranged between 23 and 39 years with an average of about 30 years. Their husbands were aged between 26 to 42 years. These were married between 2-14 years with the majority of the respondents having a marriage of 4-8 years. Duration of infertility ranged from 1.5 to 14 years.

The level of education was also quite diverse. Three respondents had done only primary education (up to class 5), four had done secondary education (class 10-12), five had done graduation (bachelor's degree) and three had done postgraduate education. The majority of the participants (11 out of 15) were homemakers, and four were employed (two as teachers, one as a nurse and one in a private company). Husbands worked in the fields of farming, business, the private sector, teaching, and government.

There were also differences in family structures. Eight of the participants lived in joint families with in-laws and other extended family members, and the remaining seven lived in nuclear families and had only husbands. The income of families was also very diverse with an average of 15,000 to 80,000 rupees earned monthly. The majority of the respondents (17 out of 20) had used some type of infertility care, starting with simple fertility tests to several rounds of assisted reproductive therapies, and three had yet to commence formal medical therapy.

2.5 In-depth Interviews

The data collection was done by using an in-depth interview schedule with the use of Hindi and English, as preferred by the participants. Interviews were conducted by the researcher using an interview schedule in private settings within the healthcare facilities. The duration of each interview

schedule was 40-50 minutes. The thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis was done through the familiarisation of data, initial code generation, searching and reviewing of themes, theme definition and naming, and final production of the report. This is a systematic process that allowed finding significant patterns in the data and making interpretations according to the research objectives and available literature. During the process of analysis, the researcher kept reflexive memos writing about the interpretations of the analysis. Later interview schedules did not bring new themes, hence the evidence of data saturation.

The interview questionnaire was built according to the purpose of the study and available literature on infertility and social support. The interview schedule incorporated open ended questions that discussed:

- The support of partners (emotional and practical) experiences.
- Family issues, such as in-law and natal family support and pressures.
- Social stigma experiences and attitudes of the community.

Also, there were field notes that were upheld to record contextual and non-verbal communication.

3. RESULTS

The 20 in-depth interviews analysed showed that there was a prime theme, several sub-themes, which responded to the purpose of the study. This theme draws a focus on the intricate social background of the situation where married women experience infertility and inexpensive social assistance.

3.1 Social Support Systems

This theme includes the experiences of the participants in terms of being supported and pressured by their partners, families, and communities. The social support systems were extremely diverse, with one extreme of a highly supportive one, and the other extreme of a massively hostile one, and highly contradictory, i.e., a supportive husband in an unsupportive joint family, a supportive natal family with a distance that prevented the offering of daily help.

3.1.1 Partner Support Experiences

The support of the partners became one of the critical elements that influenced the experiences of infertility of the participants and their capacity to manage the stresses. Respondents reported incredibly different experiences of partner support, with some having husbands who were extremely supportive and offered emotional support, defended their wives against family reproach and even actively involved themselves in the treatment, to others who were unsupportive or ambivalent in their support, blaming the wife, refusing to be evaluated or even adjusting to the family opinion over the needs of their wives.

Supportive Partners

Some of the respondents reported their husbands as their main emotional and strength providers. These supportive spouses reassured the wives, defended them against criticism in the family, and were more than just involved in making and executing treatment decisions and processes.

Respondent 3, a 28-year-old female married for 6 years, described her husband's unwavering support: "*Mere pati ne kabhi mujhe dosh nahi diya. Who humesha hi mujhe support krte hain mujhe tension nhi lete dete. Wo kehte hain, yeh toh bhagwan ki marzi hai, Jab hona hoga tab ho jae ga.*" (My husband always supports me and does not let me take any stress. He says, 'It is God's will; it will happen when it is meant to happen.') She said that her husband provided her with the necessary support to endure the tough scenario and find the needed power to withstand the pressure of her family throughout the treatment.

Similarly, Respondent 7, a 31-year-old teacher married for 7 years and she stressed the role of her husband: "*Mere husband ne apna bhi check-up karwaya. Woh kehte hain ki problem kisi mein bhi ho sakti hai; zaroori nahi hai ki sirf mahila mein hi dikkat ho. Aur woh hamesha doctor ko dikhane mere saath chalte hain.*" (My husband also got himself tested. He says that the problem can be with anyone; it is not necessary that only the woman has an issue. He always accompanies me to the doctor.") It was appreciated by the fact that this husband was ready to be evaluated and realised that infertility may be a male factor problem, and male infertility remains a very stigmatised topic and men frequently refuse to take tests.

One of the women said that her husband saved her against familial pressure: Respondent 11: 26-year-old woman married for 4 years: *“Jab sasural waale doosri shaadi ki baat chhedte hain, toh mere pati unhe seedhe taur par keh dete hain, ‘Main isi ke saath apni zindagi bitaunga, chahe humein bachcha ho ya na ho.’ Yeh sunkar mujhe bahut himmat aur hausla milta hai.”* (When my in-laws raise the issue of a second marriage, my husband firmly tells them, ‘I will spend my life with her, whether or not we are blessed with a child.’ Hearing this gives me immense strength and encouragement.”) The childlessness did not give this marriage the much-needed emotional security as this husband demonstrated.

Unsupportive or Ambivalent Partners

On the other hand, other respondents explained that their husbands were unsupportive, accused them of infertility or were inactive when family pressures came on them. These experiences had great effects of causing distress and isolation among the respondents.

Respondent 2, a 35-year-old woman married for 10 years, described her husband’s blame: *“Maine apne doston se pehle shaadi kar li thi. Aaj sabke bachche hain, lekin mere nahi. Jab log mujhse meri zindagi ke baare mein poochte hain, toh mera pati aksar chup rehta hai ya baat ko taal deta hai. Kai baar woh khud bhi mujhse pooch leta hai ki abhi tak bachcha kyun nahi hua. Is wajah se main apne hi ghar mein akeli mehsoos karti hoon.”* (“I got married earlier than my friends. Today, everyone has children, but I do not. When people ask me about my life, my husband often remains silent or avoids the topic. Many times, he himself asks me why we still do not have a child. Because of this, I feel lonely even in my own home.”) The attributing blame by this husband were highly anxiety inducing and compromised the feeling of security of the participant in this marriage.

Respondent 5, a 29-year-old woman who is married for 5 years, explained how her husband was inactive: *“Mere pati kuch nahi bolte jab unki maa mujhe taane marti hai. Woh bas chup rehte hain. Ki woh mera saath dein, par woh apni maa ke khilaf nahi bolte”* (My husband says nothing when his mother taunts me). He just stays quiet. I would like him to be on my side; however, he does not speak in disfavour of his mother). This husband could not speak in the presence of his mother when she held him to task; this made the participant feel alone and not supported.

Respondent 9, a 33-year-old woman married for 8 years, described her husband's refusal to undergo evaluation: "*Maine kaha ki aap bhi check-up karwa lo, par woh kehte hain, 'Mujhe doctor ke paas jaane ki koi zarurat nahi hai, mujhmein koi problem nahi hai.' Woh hamesha mujhi se kehte hain ki main hi doctor ko dikhaun. Woh kabhi bhi mere saath hospital nahi aate. Main akeli hi apna ilaaz karwa rahi hoon.*" (I asked him to get himself checked as well, but he says, 'I do not need to go to the doctor; there is nothing wrong with me.' He always tells me that I should be the one to consult the doctor. He never accompanies me to the hospital. I am going through the treatment all by myself.") This denial to think of male factor infertility was a hindrance to proper diagnosis and treatment.

Respondent 16, a 32-year-old woman married for 7 years, described her husband's discomfort in social situations: "*Jab bhi main aur mere pati kisi ke ghar jaate hain, woh kehte hain ki log mujhe dekh kar ya toh taras khaate hain ya kuch aise comments kar dete hain jo unhe sharminda karte hain. Unhe lagta hai ki log mujhe judge kar rahe hain. Ab mera rishtedaron ke ghar jaana bhi kam ho gaya hai.*" ("Whenever my husband and I visit someone's house, he says he feels embarrassed when people look at me with pity or make certain remarks. He feels that people are judging me. Now I have reduced visiting relatives.") This dynamic raises participation in familial and social spaces. Along with reinforcing isolation within the marital relationship.

Respondent 19, a 33-year-old woman married for 7 years, described the emotional strain: "*Log baar-baar poochte hain ki abhi tak bachcha kyun nahi hua. Rishtedaar jab milte hain toh seedha isi baat par aa jaate hain. Mere pati bhi chup rehte hain, jisse mujhe lagta hai ki main akeli hi sabka saamna kar rahi hoon.*" ("People repeatedly ask why we still do not have a child. Whenever relatives meet me, they directly bring up this issue. My husband also remains silent, which makes me feel that I am facing all this alone.") The constant questioning and lack of spousal support intensified the social pressure.

Partners' Evolving Support

Other participants explained how their husbands' support changed over time and became more supportive as they saw their wives suffer or received more knowledge on the issue of infertility.

Respondent 12, a 27-year-old woman married for 5 years, explained: “*Ab humara rishta pehle se kaafi behtar hai. Pehle mere pati bhi yeh maan lete the ki galti meri hi hai. Lekin jab doctor ne samjhaya ki yeh problem kisi ek ki nahi, balki dono mein se kisi ko bhi ho sakti hai, toh unka nazariya badal gaya. Ab woh mera saath dete hain aur kehte hain ki hum dono milkar ilaaj karwayenge.*” (“Our relationship is much better now. Earlier, my husband also believed that it was my fault. However, when the doctor explained that fertility issues can affect either partner, his attitude changed. Now he supports me and says that we will seek treatment together.”) This change of perception which was enabled by medical schooling turned the husband into a blame game to a support system.

3.1.2 Family Support and Pressures

Family relationships - especially between them and in-laws, natal families- became one of the main dimensions of the experience of the participants. The joint family system that is common in Haryana implied that most players lived with in-laws who were closely related to their day-to-day life and reproduction. The in-law experiences were both supportive and highly hostile, whereas the natal families were usually more supportive but tended to be very far geographically and inaccessible due to their geographical location.

In-Laws’ Pressures and Blame

Most of the participants in joint families reported that they were under pressure, blame, and taunts by in-laws, especially the mother-in-law and sisters-in-law. These relatives would tend to fault the participants on the infertility, doubt their value as daughters in law and provide inhospitable environments at home.

Respondent 1, a 25-year-old woman married for 3 years, explained how she was taunted on a daily basis: “*Meri saas roz kehti hai, Kya faayda teri shaadi ka jab tu ghar mein koi khushi nahi la sakti? Yeh sunke bahut dukh hota hai*” (My mother-in-law says every day, what is the use of your marriage when you cannot bring any happiness to the house? This makes me feel a great deal of pain.) All these daily reminders about her perceived failure made her home environment hostile and stressful.

Respondent 4, a 30-year-old woman married for 7 years, described being

excluded from family functions: *“Ek saal pehle meri devrani ki shaadi hui thi aur kuch hi mahine baad woh pregnant ho gayi. Jab uski godh bharai ki rasmein hui, toh mujhe meri saas ne jaan-boo-jhkar un rasmon se door rakha gaya. Ghar walon ne kaha ki meri maujoodgi se nazar lag sakti hai, isliye mujhe wahan na rehne ko bola gaya. Us waqt mujhe bahut apmaan mehsoos hua.”* (“A year ago, my sister-in-law got married, and within a few months, she became pregnant. When her baby shower rituals were performed, my mother-in-law deliberately kept me away from those rituals. The family said that my presence might bring bad luck, so I was asked not to stay there. At that time, I felt deeply humiliated.”) There was further isolation and the feeling of stigma that was added to her as a result of superstitious beliefs regarding infertility.

Respondent 6, a 32-year-old woman married for 9 years, described pressure for her husband to remarry: *“Kuch time pehle ghar mein khet-kheti ki baat chal rahi thi. Usi beech mere sasur ne mere husband te keh diya, ‘Tu doosra byaah kar le, manne pota chahiye.’ Phir bol diya, ‘Iska toh koi fayda hi na, khet aur ghar ka naam aage kaun chalayega. Yeh sab baat mere aage boli gayi. Us din main bahut royi aur manne apni bahut zyada beizzati aur dil toot-sa gaya mehsoos hua.”* (Some time ago, there was a discussion in the family about farming and fields. During that, my father-in-law told my husband, ‘You should marry again; I want a grandson.’ He then said, ‘What use is this—who will carry forward the fields and the family name?’ All of this was said in front of me. That day, I cried a lot and felt deeply humiliated, as if my heart had broken.”) The uncompromising pressure that her husband should remarry to have a grandson was an indication that son preference was high and her acceptance in the family was conditional.

Respondent 10, a 34-year-old married female who is married for 8 years, has been blamed for the cause of misfortunes in the family: *“Ghar mein agar koi bhi problem ho jaaye toh keh dete hain ki sab meri wajah se hai. Kisi ko bimaari ho jaaye ya kaam-dhaam mein nuksaan ho jaaye, toh bol dete hain, ‘Is bahu ke aane ke baad hi sab bigad gaya.’ Yeh sab sunkar mujhe lagta hai jaise main koi paap kar rahi hoon. Mere husband iklaute bete hain, isliye sasural walon ko lagta hai ki humein bachcha hona hi chahiye taaki ghar ka vansh chale. Mujhe khud itni zidd nahi hai, par saas-sasur ko khush rakhne ke liye mujh par pota dene ka bojh rehta hai.”* (If

any problem happens in the house, they say it is because of me. If someone falls sick or there is a loss in work or business, they say, ‘Everything started going wrong after this daughter-in-law came.’ Hearing all this, I feel as if I am committing some kind of sin. My husband is the only son, so my in-laws believe that we must have a child to continue the family lineage. I am not that obsessed about it myself, but there is a constant burden on me to give them a grandson and keep my in-laws happy.”) This scapegoating of the family issues that were not related worsened her feelings of worthlessness and guilt.

Respondent 18, a 30-year-old woman married for 5 years, expressed feelings of variance within her marital family: “*Main aur mere husband kaam ki wajah se gaon se door rehte hain. Do saal pehle meri nanad ko bachcha hua, tab se parivaar ke log uske ghar zyada jana pasand karte hain kyunki uske paas bachcha hai. Wahan woh bade shauk se jaate hain, lekin hamare ghar aane mein hamesha hichkichahat dikhate hain, jaise hum unke apne hi na ho.*” (“My husband and I live away from the village due to our workplace. Two years ago, my sister-in-law had a child, and since then family members prefer visiting her place because she has a child. They go there eagerly, but show hesitation in coming to our home, as if we are not even part of the family.”) This perceived preference based on parenthood contributed to her sense of exclusion from the family.

Respondent 20, a 36-year-old woman married for 11 years, shared her experience of internalised guilt: “*Mujhe aksar lagta hai ki meri wajah se hi sab pareshaan hain. Ghar mein koi seedha kuch nahi kehta, lekin unke vyavhaar se mehsoos hota hai*” (“I often feel that everyone is troubled because of me. No one says anything directly, but their behaviour makes me feel that somewhere.”) This internalisation of blame led to withdrawal of her sense of belonging within the household.

Supportive In-Laws

Some of the respondents explained that they had supportive in-laws who offered them emotional support, helped them get treatment, and defended them against community condemnation. These family supportive conditions greatly alleviated stress in the participants.

Respondent 8, a 29-year-old woman married for 5 years, described her

mother-in-law's support: "*Maine apne mata peeta bachpan mein hi kho diye the. Jab main shaadi karke sasural aayi, toh saas ne mera bahut dhyaan rakha, bilkul maa ki tarah pyaar diya. Shaadi ke paanch saal ho gaye hain, phir bhi woh aaj bhi mujhe poora support karti hain aur ilaaz kr waqt mere saath chalti hain. Woh hamesha kehti hain, 'Beta udas na ho, Bhagwan sab acha kre gye' Unke itne pyaar aur saath ki wajah se kabhi-kabhi mujhe dukh hota hai ki main unhe bachcha nahi de paa rahi hu, jabki unhone kabhi mujhe dosh nahi diya.*" ("I lost my parents when I was very young. When I came to my in-laws' home after marriage, my mother-in-law took great care of me and loved me like a mother. Even after five years of marriage, she continues to fully support me and accompanies me during my treatment. She always tells me, 'Do not be sad; God will make everything right.' Because of her love and support, I sometimes feel sad that I have not been able to give her a child, even though she has never blamed me.") This mother-in-law's emotional and practical support facilitated treatment access and reduced stress.

Respondent 14, a 26-year-old woman married for 4 years, similarly described kind in-laws: "*Mere sasural waale kehte hain ki baccha hoga toh theek, nahi hoga toh bhi koi baat nahi. Woh kehte hain, 'Tu hamari bahu hai, yeh tera ghar hai.' Mere husband bhi mera sath dete hai, kabhi koi taana nahi maarte.*" (My in-laws say that if we have a child, it's fine; if not, it's also okay. They say, 'You are our daughter-in-law, this is your home.' My husband also supports me and never makes any sarcastic remarks.") This unconditional acceptance provided emotional security and reduced the pressure associated with infertility.

Natal Family Support

Respondent's parents and siblings (natal-family) were mainly reported to be more supportive than in-laws and offer emotional support and occasionally financial support and treatment. Nevertheless, they could not always interfere in the family dynamics of marriage due to cultural values that place the women who are married as part of their marriage partners' family.

Respondent 2 expressed the need to find a refuge with her natal family: "*Jab sasural mein bahut zyada taane milte hain, main apne mayke chali jaati hoon. Meri maa mujhe bahut pyaar karti hain aur kehti hain, 'Beta, tu yahan reh ja.'* Par main janti hoon ki main hamesha wahan nahi reh sakti.

Phir bhi, main maanti hoon ki baccha hona chahiye, chahe ladka ho ya ladki... Kyunki jo kami humare rishte me hai, wo baccha hi puri kar sakta hai.” (“Whenever I get too many taunts in my in-laws’ house, I go to my parents’ place. My mother loves me very much and says, ‘Beta, stay here.’ But I know I cannot stay there forever. Even then, I believe that we should have a child, whether it’s a boy or a girl... because the child alone can fill the gap in our relationship.”) Although her family of birth gave her some relief, she had to go back to her marital place as dictated by the cultural norms.

Respondent 13, a 31-year-old woman married for 6 years, described her brother's financial support: *“Jab maine IVF karwane ka soch liya tha, toh paiso ko lekar kaafi dikkat thi. Doctor ne ilaaz ka kharcha dedh lakh ka bataya tha. Phir mai ne apne bhai se baat ki aur usne kaha ‘Tu tension mat le, mai paise bhej duga main.’ Uski maddad se hi main IVF karwa payi.”* (“When I decided to go for IVF, I was really worried about the money. The doctor had told me that the treatment would cost around 1.5 lakh. Then I talked to my brother, and he said, ‘Don’t worry, I will send the money.’ It was with his help that I was able to go through the IVF treatment.”) The financial assistance provided by this brother was instrumental in her receiving costly treatment that her marital family did not want to pay for.

Respondent 15, a 28-year-old woman married for 5 years, explained about the advocacy of her father: *“Mere papa mere sasural walon se baat karte hain aur kehte hain ki meri beti ko pareshan mat karo. Par sasural waale kehte hain ki yeh unka ghar ka mamla hai”* (My father talks to my in-laws and says don’t trouble my daughter. But my in-laws say this is their household matter). While her father attempted to intervene, his efforts were limited by the cultural norm that in-laws have authority over married daughters.

3.1.3 Attitudes of the Community and Social Stigma

In addition to immediate family, the respondents reported feeling stigmatised and socially rejected by the larger community, such as neighbours, family members, and friends. Community views on infertility also tended to be negative and those women who had no children were considered incomplete, unlucky, or cursed. The result of these attitudes was social isolation and shunning of social situations.

Social Exclusion

Most of the respondents reported that they were not included in the social and religious activities or were gossiped and speculated about in their societies.

Respondent 1 described exclusion from religious ceremonies: “*Jab humari shaadi hui, toh sab bas yahi chahate the ki jaldi se jaldi baccha ho. Har koi meri taraf dekhta tha, aur mujhe hi taut marte the. Jab ghar me koi puja-path hota hai, toh mujhe bulaya hi nahi jata, kehte hain ki iss aurat ke hath se shagun nahi hota... Main bas apne kamre me hi baithi rehti hoon, dil me udaasi liye.*” (When we got married, everyone just wanted me to have a child as soon as possible. Everyone would look at me, and I was the one who got all the taunts. Whenever there was a puja or ritual at home, I was not even invited—they would say that auspiciousness does not come from this woman’s hands... I just sit in my room, carrying sadness in my heart.) This exclusion based on beliefs about infertility as inauspicious reinforced her sense of being defective and unwelcome.

Respondent 4 described community gossip: “*Jab main gali mein bache khelte huve dekhti hoon, toh mujhe khalipan aur udaasi mehsoos hoti hai. Aur gaon me sab log mere baare mein baatein karte hain, kehte hain, 'Dekho, shaadi ko itne saal ho gaye, par abhi tak koi baccha nahi.' Jab main bahar nikalti hoon, log mujhe dekhte hain aur phusphusate hain... Main bas chup-chaap ghar me wapis aa jaati hoon, udaasi le kr.*” (“When I see children playing in the street, I feel emptiness and sadness. People in the village talk about me, saying, ‘Look, it’s been so many years of marriage, and yet she doesn’t have a child.’ When I go outside, people look at me and whisper... I just quietly go back home, carrying the sadness with me.”) This constant surveillance and gossip made her reluctant to participate in community life.

Respondent 9 explained that she would get blamed as the cause of misfortune: “*Kabhi agar main kisi ke ghar chali jaati hoon aur baad me wahan koi parishani ho jaaye, toh log bolne lagte hain ki meri hi nazar lag gayi. Peeche se kehte hain, 'Banjh aurat ki nazar bahut buri hoti hai.' Ye sab sun ke ab mujhe lagta hai ki kahin jaana hi theek nahi... isliye main ab kisi ke ghar jaane se darti hoon.*” (“Sometimes, if I visit someone’s house and later something goes wrong there, people start saying that it was because of me—that I cast an evil eye. They whisper behind my back, ‘A

barren woman's gaze is very bad.' Hearing all this, I now feel that it's better not to go anywhere at all... that's why I've started being afraid to visit anyone's home.") These superstitious beliefs about infertile women carrying bad luck led to social isolation.

Respondent 17, a 33-year-old woman married for 9 years, reflected on the change in her family dynamics after the arrival of her *devar's* wife in the household: "*Ab ghar mein mere devar ki nayi bahu aa gayi hai, toh sab log mujhe nazarandaaz karne ke liye alag-alag bahane bana lete hain. Unke vyavhaar aur nazron se hi yeh saaf dikh jaata hai ki main ab pehle jaisi maayne nahi rakhti. Mujhse baat kam ki jaati hai aur mujhe mehsoos hota hai ki jaise main iss ghar ka hissa hote hue bhi alag ho gayi hoon.*" ("Now that my brother-in-law's wife has come as the new bride in the family, everyone makes different excuses to ignore me. Their behaviour and the way they look at me clearly show that I no longer hold the same importance. They talk to me less, and I feel as if I have become separate even while being a part of this family.") The persistent neglect by her family members created a sense of emotional alienation.

Comparisons and Insensitive Remarks

The participants also reported about painful comparisons with fertile women and insensitive remarks of the members of the community that emphasised their childlessness.

Respondent 5 explained constant questioning: "*Jab bhi main kisi se milti hoon, pehla sawal bas yahi hota hai—'Khushkhabri kab suna rahe ho?' Koi yeh nahi sochta ki ye sunke mere dil pe kya guzarti hai. Har baar wahi sawaal, wahi chubhan..., par main bas chup rehti hoon aur sab sah leti hoon.*" ("Whenever I meet someone, the first question they ask is, 'When will you share some good news?' No one thinks about what I go through hearing this. Every time it's the same question, the same sting... but I stay silent and endure it all.") The persistent inquiries regarding giving birth rendered all the social contacts torturous.

Respondent 7 described comparisons with younger women: "*Mere se chhoti ladkiyan, jinhone mere baad shaadi ki, unke bacche ho gaye. Log compare karte hain aur kehte hain, 'Dekho, woh kitni chhoti thi, uske toh do bacche bhi ho gaye, aur tu abhi tak...' Ye baatein sunke dil bahut dukh jata hai, khud par hi sawaal uthne lagte hain, aur raat ko neend bhi nahi*

aati hai.” (“Girls younger than me, who got married after I did, already have children. People compare me with them and say, ‘Look, she was so young, and she already has two children, and you still...’ Hearing such things hurts deeply, makes me question myself, and even keeps me awake at night.”) These comparisons emphasised her perceived failure and inadequacy.

Respondent 11 described insensitive advice: “*Ek din jab main naukri se ghar aa rahi thi, pados ki aunty mil gayi. Pyaar se poochhne lagi, ‘Aaj bhi late ho gayi?’ Phir dheere se boli, ‘Aurat agar bas kaam hi karti rahe, toh ghar ki cheezein reh jaati hain... pooja-paath bhi zaroori hota hai.’ Thodi der ruk kar kehne lagi, ‘Aaj-kal ladkiyan sirf kamai pe dhyaan deti hain, isliye ghar me woh sukh nahi aa pata.’ Main samajh gayi unka ishara kis taraf tha. Kuch keh nahi paayi, bas chup-chaap ghar aa gayi, mann bhara hua tha.*” One day, while I was returning home from work, I ran into a neighbour aunty. She asked sweetly, ‘Did you get late again today?’ Then, in a soft voice, she said, ‘If a woman only focuses on work, the household things get neglected... praying is also important.’ After a pause, she added, ‘These days, girls only think about earning money, and that’s why happiness doesn’t come into the home.’ I understood exactly what she was hinting at. I couldn’t say anything and quietly came back home, my heart feeling heavy.” This attribution of infertility to psychological factors rather than recognising it as a medical condition was frustrating and invalidating.

Avoidance of Social Situations

The compounding impact of social stigma, isolation, and insensitive remarks caused most of the participants to avoid social interactions and become isolated.

Respondent 6 explained how she does not go to social events: “*Main ab kisi ki birthday party ya shaadi mein nahi jaati. Wahan sab apne bacchon ke saath hote hain, hansi-mazaak chal raha hota hai, aur phir koi na koi mujhse pooch hi leta hai ki mera baccha kab hoga. Us waqt smile karna padta hai, par andar se dil bhar aata hai. Isliye main zyada tar ghar mein hi rehti hoon.*” (“I no longer go to anyone’s birthday parties or weddings. Everyone there is with their children, laughing and enjoying themselves, and then someone or the other inevitably asks me when I will have a child. At that moment, I have to smile, but inside my heart feels heavy. That’s why I mostly stay at home.”) This self-imposed isolation protected her from

painful interactions but also increased her loneliness.

Respondent 10 spoke about restriction of social contacts: “*Main sirf zaruri kaam ke liye hi bahar jaati hoon. Baki zyada tar ghar mein hi rehti hoon, kyunki bahar jaane par log taane maarte hain. Dheere-dheere logon se milna bhi chhoot gaya hai.*” (“I go out only for essential work. Otherwise, I mostly stay at home, because whenever I step out, people make taunting remarks. Gradually, I’ve stopped meeting people altogether.”) This life withdrawal was an indication of the severe consequences of stigma on her life and mental wellbeing.

4. DISCUSSION

This qualitative research examined the lived experiences of social support among married women experiencing infertility in Hisar, Haryana, and the interaction of partner support, family, and community attitudes, decision-making and barriers to care, has shown a complex nature of influencing the experience of infertility in the context of the North Indian setting. These results help clarify the experience of infertility, not as a medical circumstance but as a highly social phenomenon that resides within patriarchal families, financial limitations, and cultural understandings of reproduction, gender and the continuation of the family.

Social Support Systems: Navigating Complex Family and Community Dynamics

The original significant theme, which was social support systems, showed a very fluctuating experience of partner, family, and community support and pressure. This variation highlights the fact that Haryana cannot be homogenised in terms of infertility experiences because it is always the result of individual family processes, socioeconomic resources, and the particular mix of supportive and unfavourable actors in the life of each woman.

Partner support: The support of partners proved to be a crucial one, which is in accordance with the findings of the international studies that confirm that spousal support helps to withstand infertility-related distress and cope (Greil et al., 2010). The positive partners in this research gave emotional support, defended their wives against criticism in the family and they were also assessed themselves and were also directly involved in the decisions about the treatment. These supportive behaviours were specifically useful

in the Haryana scene, where women have minimal power in marital families and when they are severely blamed in case they have failed to bear children. A supportive husband would also be an invaluable ally because he would be able to utilise his power in the family to defend his wife.

Nevertheless, this was not the case with all of the participants. Other husbands accused their wives of being infertile or unwilling to undergo an assessment, or even passive when their families criticised them. These discriminatory behaviours represent bigger trends of gender relations between males and females, where women are the ones who bear children and little is ever said about the fertility of men (Inhorn, 2012). The result that the support of some husbands changed as time went on, usually after medical education regarding infertility, implies that medical professionals can play a significant role by involving husbands and breaking the myths surrounding infertility as a female issue.

Family dynamics: The central experience of the participants focused on the family relationships, especially with the in-laws. The joint family system, which was common in Haryana, implied that most members of the family resided with in-laws who were closely involved in their reproductive life. Although a few of the in-laws were supportive and helped access treatment, many of the participants talked about being taunted on a daily basis, being blamed, being sidelined during family events, and being pressured to remarry their husbands. The result of such hostile environments within the families was chronic stress and a sense of belonging and value to the families of the participants in the marital context, as childbearing is very highly valued in Haryana, especially son bearing, as they are viewed as the only way of maintaining the family, securing old age, and social status (Patel, 2007). The daughters-in-law without children are considered as not performing their main marital role and thus they can be a threat to the family lineage and future. The observation that in certain instances the participants were attributed with having caused unrelated misfortunes of the family is indicative of the larger cultural assumptions concerning women who were infertile as being unholy or cursed (Riessman, 2000).

Natal families: The natal families were usually more helpful, offering emotional support and in some cases, financial help to treat someone, unlike the in-laws. But their intervention powers in the marriage family dynamics

were hampered by the cultural norms which placed the married women as part of their husbands' families. The result indicates the significance of the natal family support as an asset to the infertile women, as it also points to the limitations of the same in the patriarchal family setup (Parry, 2005).

Community attitudes and social stigma: The social stigma and community attitudes made the problems that the participants had in their families even harder. Ostracism about social and religious roles, constant rumination on childbearing, excruciating comparisons with fertile women, attributing ill fortunes to infertile women and attributing good fortunes to fertile women and attributing bad fortunes on infertile women made people's exclusions much more so the women, causing a high rate of withdrawal from social life (Lisle, 1999). Although this kind of social isolation kept the participants out of painful interactions, it also added loneliness and prevented the participants from accessing social support networks (Sandelowski et al., 1990). The observation that infertile women are perceived as inauspicious and are not invited to auspicious events signifies the age-old cultural beliefs regarding fertility as central to the value of women in society and ritual purity (Riessman, 2000).

Cultural Context and Implications for Healthcare

The interpretation of these findings should be within the cultural context of Haryana, which is highly patriarchal, son-preferential, joint families, and with inflexible gender roles (Chowdhry, 2007). Here, the social position and acceptance of women are tightly connected to their fertility and infertility is a source of severe stigma and social implications. Although the system of joint family offers a potential support system, it tends to be a pressure group and spies on the women with various family members checking and rating the reproductive outcomes of the women. This skewed sex ratio, as manifested by the high son preference in Haryana, adds to the pressure women are under to have children and especially sons (Patel, 2007).

Recognise infertility as a social and relational issue, not just a medical condition: Understand infertility as a social and relational problem, and not a medical one. To provide effective care, it is necessary not only to address the biological dimension of the problem of infertility but also the social and psychological ones, the relationships in the family, stigma, and social isolation. Involve partners and family in care (Hasanpoor-Azghdy, Simbar, & Vedadhir, 2014).

Engage partners and family members in care: Considering the significant role of husbands and in-laws in treatment and the construction of women's experience, medical professionals ought to engage the family members in consultations, offer education on infertility, and dispel the myth about infertility as a women-only issue (Jensen, 2016).

Offer psychosocial support services: The social stigma and family pressure experienced by women facing infertility are quite distressing to the psyche. Psychosocial interventions such as counselling, support groups and other services would assist women to overcome these issues (Whiteford & Gonzalez, 1995).

Leverage existing support systems, particularly supportive partners and natal families: Use the support networks available, especially the supportive couples and birth families. Though, numerous participants had to deal with unsupportive in-laws and communities, supportive partners and natal families were valuable resources. These support systems should be identified and reinforced by the healthcare providers (Martins et al., 2014).

5. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

- **Institutional Constraints:** The study was carried out in the private clinical environment due to the non-availability of approval from government healthcare institutions.. Fieldwork was determined by ethical processes and permission of access, which determined recruitment of participants and collection of data.
- **Limited Access to the participants by official mediums:** The participants were mostly exposed to the healthcare facilities as per the institutional protocols, which might have hindered the inclusion of women who were not under formal medical systems and had different experiential backgrounds.
- **Sensitivity and Context-Specificity of the Study:** Due to the stigma on infertility in patriarchal cultures, the participants might have been cautious to provide personal accounts and the results are confined to the particular socio-cultural perspective.

6. CONCLUSION

This qualitative research is an eye opener to the fact that infertility is being experienced in a complex social environment with fluctuating partner support, strong family pressure, widespread community stigma and a host

of barriers to treatment access. The social support systems were of the most supportive partners and families that helped with treatment, and offered emotional support to women; and aggressive in-laws and communities that victimised women, ostracised their social lives, and caused chronic stress.

The results have significant implications for healthcare practitioners, policymakers, and researchers in the efforts of assisting infertile couples in the context of Haryana and other situations in India. The provision of healthcare needs to become more social and relational, including partners and family members, discussing the financial aspect of the situation, offering easy access to information, and offering psychosocial assistance to infertile people. Education on infertility in the population might support the earlier detection and prompt seeking of therapy, and the policy to make infertility therapy more affordable might decrease socioeconomic inequality in accessing therapy.

In the long term, infertility in Haryana might be addressed through not only medical but also a more general change in societal norms that reinforce the stigma around being childless, criticise the traditional gender roles that blame the women as being infertile, and provide more supportive spaces to couples to live with infertility. Although this social change is inevitably long-term, medical workers could make significant contributions to it, offering caring, family-oriented, culturally sensitive, treatment that is sensitive to the multidimensional nature of the infertility experiences.

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Forest Tribes and Trade in Forest Produce in Early India

ASHISH KUMAR

Abstracts

Forest tribes are usually distinguished from the residents of cities and villages in early Indian literature, and they are often portrayed in modern writings as primitive and culturally backward. This paper argues that these forest tribes despite being different from the residents of cities and villages, were neither backward nor primitive. Rather, they had been actively involved in the exchange of forest produce in early India. Owing of their deep knowledge of forests, forest tribes were useful for the rulers and traders, and this paper proposes that kings and traders had forged close ties with the forest tribes to gain an access to forest wealth. Based on epigraphic and literary evidence, this paper reflects upon the role of forest tribes in the trade networks with a focus on their interactions with the rulers as well as traders in early India.

Keywords: Forest tribes, Ashoka, *Arthashastra*, *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, Cosmas Indicopleustes

Introduction

In the *Mrichhakatika* ('The Little Clay Cart', dated circa 300-500 AD) of Shudraka, a house of a courtesan in Ujjain in present Madhya Pradesh is described as having a threshold adorned with ivory portal, flowers, and jewels, etc. Out of seven courtyards of this house, one courtyard is mentioned to have had bullocks, buffalo, monkeys, rams, horses, and elephants. In second courtyard a butcher's boy was washing a mess of chitterlings for cooking. And several tamed birds like doves, parrots, cuckoos, quails, partridges, pigeons, peacocks, flamingos, and cranes were present in third courtyard (Ryder 1905: 67-71). The presence of such a variety of forest produce including ivory portal, animals, and birds in a courtesan's house in Ujjain underlines the demand of these in urban

markets among the city dwellers and it also shows the presence of a trade network that had facilitated sale of these products in urban markets in early India. In the economic history of early India, however, much emphasis is laid upon traders, trade routes, and artisans by scholars, whose writings usually characterise the trade -both regional as well as international, as an urban phenomenon, and the role of forest tribes in trade activities has not received their adequate attention. This paper reflects upon the role of forest tribes in the supply network of plant and animal produce from forests to urban markets, and both kings and traders are argued to have recognised the importance of forest tribes to gain access to forest produce that had been in demand in Indian as well as foreign markets in ancient times.

Defining a Forest Tribe

The forest (*aranya*, *vana*, *atavi*, *jangala*) was a space that was different from a village (*grama*) as well as a city (*nagara*), but not necessarily entirely cut-off from the world outside the forests. Since the forests constituted a space that was different from urban and rural areas, the populations that lived here had been distinguished from those living in cities and villages. In the early Indian literature, we come across several names, viz., Nishada, Sabara, Pulinda, Kirata, and Bhila, for different forest groups that are usually assigned an expression 'tribe' in modern English language. The term 'tribe' here needs some elaboration. The expression, 'tribe' refers to the forest-dwellers in several writings of the colonial and post-colonial times, in which the tribal population of India has often been portrayed as aboriginal, backward and savage (see for details, Guha 1999). This view has been questioned by Shereen Ratnagar (2010), according to whom, agricultural, pastoral, and hunting-gathering communities have always interacted with each other. With the emergence of agricultural and pastoral communities in the Neolithic Age, hunting-and-gathering activities did not entirely disappear. In fact, forest-dwellers involved in hunting and gathering activities have remained present alongside the rural and urban societies up to the present times. The forest-dwellers had never been immune to change, and we learn from the edicts of the Mauryan king Ashoka (circa 267-232 BC) about the people of *atavi*

(forest) in central India, from whose background several *atavika-rajyas* (forest kingdoms) came into existence in the Gupta period (circa 4th-6th century CE), and one of these forest kingdoms belonged to a Pulinda king (*pulinda-raja-rashtra*; Chattopadhyaya 2011: 158).

Despite being different, tribal communities need not to be considered inferior from those who lived in cities. In fact, kinship ties, common ownership of resources and lack of private property are identified as three key features that have historically distinguished a tribal society from an urban society. A tribal society lacks ‘city-life’ and ‘writing’ not because of its backwardness, rather because of its peculiar social structure, which ‘lacks the elites and social hierarchies and institutions of governance that create the need for written records and make possible the social complexity and division of labour that is the essence of urbanism’ (Ratnagar 2010: xi, 32, 51-52). Ratnagar (2010: 1-3; 2004: 31-36) uses the term ‘tribe’ to define ‘a stage of cultural evolution that precedes the early state’, and according to her, kinship ties play a key role in shaping production relations and also in sustaining ‘joint holding of land, water resources, pasture and forests’ in a tribe. When the term ‘tribe’ is used in this paper, it refers to a group or groups of people who have coexisted with the settled and stratified societies ruled by monarchies, but retained their lineage or kinship based social organisation. Because of their lineage-based social structure, the forest groups did not follow the *varna* norms, and therefore, they had been outside the purview of the Brahmanical social order in early India. This paper maintains that the forest tribes historically had not only co-existed but actively interacted with the monarchical polities and urban as well as agrarian societies in early India.

King Ashoka and the Forest-dwellers

The perceptions of forest in early India were neither static nor uniform, and what appears is that the early Indians perceived the forest in multiple ways. Forests were not only imagined as sites fit for monastic establishments, but also as the habitat of fierce demonic forces. Unlike a village, according to Romila Thapar (2001: 2-3), forest (*aranya*) lacked the cohesion because of its being ‘the habitat of those who did not live by

dharma, such as brigands and thieves.’ Thapar (2001: 4) further adds that ‘the forest was the context for at least three activities: the hunt, the hermitage, and the place of exile’ in early India. The royal hunt, the setting up of hermitage, and the activities in exile of epic heroes in forest, all these show the ways penetration of settled society into the forest space was imagined in the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, and Kalidasa’s *Shakuntala*. The kings and the exiled epic heroes whereas are shown to have employed violence, hermits appear to have used religion to establish an order (*dharma*) in a chaotic space of the forest. Since the forest dwellers did not follow the Shastric norms, their activities of hunting and gathering are condemned in the early Indian literature that praises the royal hunt and projects the king as the upholder of the *varnashramadharma* (Thapar 2001: 5-10) - the *dharma* of *varnas* and *ashramas* is traditionally considered in the Dharmashastric traditions as constituting the very core of Hinduism.

The earliest known Indian king, who made attempts to bring the forest tribes under the purview of *dharma* (dhamma) was king Ashoka of the Mauryan dynasty. In his Major Rock Edict XIII, Ashoka asked forest tribes to give up violence and embrace dhamma¹, and this shows that this Mauryan emperor considered the forest tribes within the purview of his authority. However, the *dharma* that Ashoka propagated was different from the *dharma* prescribed in the *Dharmashastras*. Contrary to Brahmanical tradition that made *varnashramadharma* central to its social system (‘the notion of a specific dharma for specific people’), according to Patrick Olivelle, ‘Ashoka’s dharma is a system of moral behaviour that is based on ... reason, and is universally applicable to both the rich and the poor, both the eminent and the lowly, both in his territory and across the world’ (Olivelle, 2023: 61-162). Dharma-Mahamattas not only engaged with the people in cities and villages, but they apparently also introduced the forest tribes to Ashoka’s dhamma, and among the people, who had been exposed to dhamma, are included Pulindas in the Rock Edict XIII.² Probably, Ashoka is the earliest and the only early Indian king, who laid down elaborate rules in his Pillar Edict V (Rampurva Text) (Sircar 2009: 60) regarding the killing of animals, and these rules are as follows:

1. The killing of various types of animals, birds and fishes that according to Ashoka were neither useful nor edible, was completely prohibited. A similar list of fishes and also of auspicious birds is provided in the *Arthashastra*, which directs the Supervisor of Slaughter to 'impose the highest fine (for violence) for binding, killing or injuring deer, beasts, birds or fish for whom safety has been proclaimed and who are kept in reserved parks' (Kangle 1963: 180).
2. The edict records that those 'she-goats, ewes and sows, which are either pregnant or milch, are not to be slaughtered, nor their young ones which are less than six months old' (Sircar 2009: 60). Similarly, the *Arthashastra* prohibits the killing of calf and milch cow, and prescribes fines for killing these (Kangle 1963: 181).
3. Ashoka prohibited the useless burning of forests, and also people were prohibited from burning forests for the sake of destroying living beings. Forest figures as one of the sources of state's revenue in the *Arthashastra* (Kangle 1963: 86), and by prohibiting the useless burning of forests, Ashoka probably aimed to protect an important source of his state's revenue.
4. Ashoka prohibited the killing of fishes and animals on certain auspicious days for sale in markets. Likewise, on some auspicious days, castration of bulls, he-goats, rams, boars and such animals was prohibited. In a same way, branding of bulls and horses was prohibited on certain days.

Not only the killing of animals for sacrifice was prohibited, but also those festival gatherings were banned that involved slaughter of animals. However, Ashoka did not completely ban the killing of animals for food, and he himself accepted the killing of two peacocks and one deer daily in the royal kitchen for food (Sircar 2009: 34). Noticeably, Ashoka had made non-violence (*ahimsa*) an integral part of his Dhamma project; but still he never gave up violence entirely, and from his Pillar Edict IV it is evident that he never discontinued corporal or capital punishment (Olivelle 2023: 172). In a same way, instead of completely banning the killing of animals, birds and fishes for food, Ashoka appears to have made attempts to regularise it through royal edicts. Like Ashoka's edicts, the *Arthashastra*

too prescribes rules regarding the killing of animals, birds and fishes, and recommends the appointment of a special officer to look after the hunting/killing of animals, birds and fishes, as well as selling of their meat in markets. Except Ashoka, no other early Indian king probably ever tried to regularise the food habits of his subject people.

For this paper, noticeable is the practice of animal killing in rituals and festivals, and also demand of meat of animals, birds and fishes in rural/urban markets under the Mauryas. Since the forest tribes depended upon hunting and gathering for their livelihood, they had been an integral part of supply network through which meat was supplied to rural/urban markets for customers. Same is supported by the Jataka story ('Mamsa-Jataka'), which informs us about a deer hunter, who supplied deer-meat to *Vikkinisa-Samiti* (some type of a professional group or committee, involved in the purchase-or-sale of meat) in a city (Francis and Neil 2002: 33; Fausbøll 1963: 49). In a same way, Jinadasa Gani's *Nishitha Curni* (circa 700 AD) informs us about the hunters and butchers, who 'regularly supplied the king and the public with the meat of the animals' in cities (Sen 1975: 88, 202).

Trade in Forest Produce

The *Arthashastra* is one of the earliest texts that identified the forests as a source of wealth for rulers and 'the economic importance of forests in the formulation of principles and policies of the state' is particularly highlighted by Kautiliya in this text (Ray 1996: 221). The Director of Forest Produce managed diverse types of forest produce by supervising the collection and storage of these with the support of forest guards (Kangle, 1963: 148). From the *Arthashastra*, forests appear to have been the source of varieties of plant (hard wood, reeds, creepers, fibre plants, medicinal plants, poisons, bamboo-cane), animal (skin, bones, horns, hooves, tails), and mineral (metals) produce (Kangle, 1963: 148-150) as well as elephants, which were used in armies as war machines in ancient times (Ray 1996: 224-225). Like early India, elephants were also used in armies by the West Asian polities, which mainly procured elephants from India. We learn from the Greek sources about the 500 war elephants that Seleucus Nikator, who had become the ruler of West Asia after the demise

of Alexander the Great in 323 BC, from Chandragupta Maurya (circa 324/321-297 BC) in return of three important areas, viz., Paropanisadai (region to the south-east of the Hindukush), Arachosia (area of Kandahar in Afghanistan) and Gedrosia (present Baluchistan) (Chakravarti 2016: 132).

In the early to mid-centuries CE also, India remained a source of war elephants for the West Asian rulers and the Sasanian rulers of Iran (circa 224-651 AD) appear to have used Indian elephants in wars and hunting expeditions regularly (Trautmann 2018: 250-256). According to Thomas R. Trautmann (2016: 80), Elephants were ‘captured wild, tamed and trained for work and war,’ and they were ‘not domesticated from birth’ because of economic reasons. Trautmann (2016: 80) further adds: ‘Elephants are prodigious eaters and do not reach the age at which they can be used for human purposes until twenty years, so it is far cheaper to capture them as adults rather than rear them from birth and feed them in stables.’ Therefore, the *Arthashastra* recommends the rulers to establish elephant forests and prescribes to employ forest dwellers (*atavi, vanacaraka*) to look after the elephants in these forests (Trautmann 2016: 164-169). However, ‘neither the Arthasastra of Kautilya nor any other ancient authority hints at a royal monopoly of elephants and horses’ (Ray 1996: 225).

The private players had been involved in the trade of elephants and horses in early India, and this is well evident from a graphic account of a gathering of merchants (*desiya-vaniya-meli*) in the *Kuvalayamala* of Udyotanasuri (dated 779 AD) that highlights the involvement of Indian traders in the sale and purchase of diverse commodities including those procured from forests. A group of caravan traders, who congregated at the port of Sopara in present day Maharashtra are described to have shared details of commercial commodities and their markets within as well as outside early India: for instance, Kosala in mid-Ganga valley had markets for horses and elephants; markets for betel nuts and horses were in Uttarapatha, and conch-shells could be traded in Dvaravati/Dwarka in present Gujarat. Commodities like fabrics, pearls, and ivory were available in the markets of Barabaricum/Debal, a port-town on the mouth

of Indus River. On the other hand, Suvarna-dvipa (Sumatra and Java) had markets, where fabrics of Palasha tree and gold were traded. China (Mahacina) had markets for buffaloes, water deer and silk fabrics, and leaves of Nimba tree and precious gems could be traded in the markets of Ratnadvipa (Sri Lanka) (Upadhye 1970: 118-119; see for Dvaravati: Law 1954: 282-283; See also for a brief discussion on *desiya-vaniya-meli*, Kumar 2023: 222). Elephants were sold in the markets, and a tenth century AD stone inscription of the reign of Kalachuri king Yuvarajadeva II refers to the taxes that were to be collected on the sale of every elephant and a horse in the market place (*mandapika*) of the Bilhari town (Jabalpur district, Madhya Pradesh; Mirashi 1955: 204-224).

In addition to private trade in elephant and horse, here particularly noticeable is the reference to ivory in the Greco-Roman text, *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (dated 40-70 AD) along with nard, costus, bdellium, onyx/agate, Chinese silk and variety of cotton cloths that were exported from Barygaza (ancient Bhargukachchha, identified with modern Broach in Gujarat) to markets in the Roman West. Forest produce including semi-precious stones like onyx/agate and variety of plant products (nard, costus, bdellium) were brought to Barygaza via Ujjain from the interior parts of India. Paithana and Tagara (both in Maharashtra) were other two important ports that were connected to Barygaza, which is mentioned to have received onyx/agate from Paithan and cotton textiles from Taraga (Ter) for export. The hinterland of Barygaza from where these forest produces were procured is described in the *Periplus* as comprising ‘many barren areas, great mountains, and wild animals of all kinds- leopards, tigers, elephants, enormous serpents, hyenas, and a great many kinds of monkeys, as many populous nations up to the Ganges’ (Casson 1989: 81-83; Gupta 2025: 275-276). The river Ganga is called the greatest of all rivers of India in the *Periplus*, which records that commodities like malabathrum, Gangetic nard, pearls, and varieties of cotton garments were also shipped out through the Ganga for trade in foreign lands (Casson 1989: 91). Like Barygaza, Muziris and Nelkynda-Bekare ports on the Malabar coast of Kerala in peninsular India, according to the *Periplus*, had exported ivory along with black pepper, gemstones, pearls and tortoise shell to markets in the Roman Egypt (Casson 1989: 83-85; Cobb 2025).

Available evidence shows that the forest produce including minerals (amethyst, gemstones), plants (spikenard, malabathrum) and animals (parrots) from India were considered valuable in the Greco-Roman world, where they 'were commonly used in medicine, rituals and personal items' in the early centuries AD (Salvo 2025).

We are told that elephants were hunted by forest tribes for their meat and ivory in peninsular India, where the forest dwellers had also played a key role in the procurement of gemstones from forested mountains (Cobb 2025: 315). Noticeable here is the Muziris papyrus, which informs us about a trade contract between two merchants regarding the export of Gangetic nard, ivory, and textiles from Muziris to Myos Hormos (ancient port in Egypt on the Red Sea) in the mid-200 AD (Casson 1990: 195-206; Parker 2009: 173-174). The export of ivory objects to Roman markets is evident from the discovery of an ivory figurine of a woman at Pompeii, which had reached Pompeii sometime before 79 AD - the year, when the entire city was buried under a thick layer of volcano debris after an eruption of Vesuvius. This Pompeii figurine's Indian origin is established on the basis of the discovery of identical ivory statuette of a woman at Ter (Tagara) as well as Bhokardan (Bhogavardhana), both in Maharashtra (Parker 2009: 160, 163-164). Early India was a home of professional ivory workers, and we know about them from a votive inscription (Buhler 1894: 378) recording a collective donation by ivory workers (*dantakaras*) to the Buddhist stupa at Sanchi in the late centuries BC, and these ivory workers had probably been members of a guild in a city, Vidisha that is now located near to Sanchi in Madhya Pradesh. In addition to ivory/ivory products, early Indians also exported diverse types of hard woods (teak-wood and beams, logs of sissoo and ebony) from Barygaza to Oman in the Persian Gulf, according to the *Periplus* (Casson 1989: 73).

We learn from the *Christian Topography*, dated to middle or late 540s AD, of Cosmas Indicopleustes (a Nestorian Christian trader from Alexandria in Egypt) about variety of commodities that were traded in the regions around the Western Indian Ocean. Commodities like silk, aloes, cloves, sandalwood and other products from China and Southeast Asia reached Sri Lanka, from where they were transhipped to ports in Malabar, Kalyan

and Sind in early India. Then these commodities along with pepper, copper and sesame-logs, cotton textiles, musk (*kastouri*), castor seeds and spikenard were exported to markets in Persia, Arabia and the Red Sea (McCrindle 1897: 365-367; Malekandathil, 2002: 159-160; Faller, 2011: 217-219). Several of these commodities had to be procured from forests with the help of forest tribes: for instance, musk, which could only be procured through forest folks by traders for its export to foreign markets. How traders engaged with the forest tribes and forged close ties with them to gain access to forest produce? To answer this question, we rely upon early Indian literature, which contains several stories about the traders and their interactions with forest folks, and a few of these stories are discussed in the following section.

Traders and Forest Tribes

A forest is portrayed as a dangerous place in the Jataka story (i.e., Apannaka-Jataka), according to which forest was associated with robbers (*cora*), wild-beasts, droughts, demons (*amanussa*) and famines (Chalmers 2002: 5; Fausbøll 1962: 99). In the opinion of R. C. Majumdar, merchants had formed cooperative bodies in ancient India to escape threats of robbers and forest tribes (Majumdar 1922: 13). We also learn from the ‘Mamsa-Jataka’ about a professional group (*Vikkinisa-Samiti*) that received supplies of meat from hunters for its sale in urban markets (Francis and Neil 2002: 33; Fausbøll 1963: 49). The *Arthashastra* assigns the southern quarter for the residence of those, who dealt in cooked food, wine and meat (Kangle 1963: 79). Sale of meat in city markets is further underlined by Kautiliya, who directs traders to ‘sell meat without bones, of deer and beasts freshly killed,’ and they are prohibited from selling meat that is swollen, foul-smelling and of a naturally dead animal (Kangle 1963: 181). Not only city-dwellers, but seafarers too consumed meat, and we learn from the Cosmas about the consumption of animal flesh and marine creatures (bull-stag, hog-deer, seal, dolphin, turtle) by sailors and seafaring traders. From the images that are contained in the manuscripts of *Christian Topography*, Adulis/Adule (an ancient port-town on the Red Sea) appears to be the place where Cosmas had tasted the meat of a hog-deer (“choirelapos”), and he seems to have come across date palms (‘mozá’)

and gazelle in the valley of Indus River (Kumar 2023: 93-94; Faller 2011: 211-215; McCrindle 1897: 359-361, 363). Seemingly, animal flesh was one of the several food items that were sold in cities, and from Cosmas, it appears that animal flesh and marine products too were available in port-towns for sale.

The *Periplus* talks about the presence of numerous tribal peoples in eastern Deccan. One of the tribes is named Kirradai (refers to Kirata), which is described as ‘a race of wild men with flattened noses’; another tribe is called Bargysoi, and members of a tribe called ‘the Horse Faces... are said to be cannibals’ (Casson 1989: 89; Law 1954: 98). A certain tribe called Sesatai is mentioned in the *Periplus* as a supplier of malabathrum leaves (spicy bay leaf/ *tejpatta*)³ at the border of the land of Thina, and the members of this tribe are described as ‘short in body and very flat-faced’ (Casson 1989: 90-91); the region that is called Thina in the *Periplus* probably corresponds to southern China abutting the Indian Northeast and northern Myanmar. Based on the information provided by the *Periplus*, Sunil Gupta (2025: 283-285) opines that the ‘tribal Sesatai must have inhabited the forested areas of the Indian Northeast and come down to the plains with the malabathrum, most likely to the Brahmaputra Valley area in the north-eastern Indian state of Assam’; he further adds that the ‘Brahmaputra river offers navigable water routes to the Ganges estuary from where, as the *Periplus* informs us, malabathrum was shipped out in ancient times.’ The role that tribal people had played in the supply of forest produce is indicated by the *Periplus*, and likewise, the early Indian story literature throws a valuable light on the commercial interactions between the forest tribes and mercantile communities.

From Banabhatta’s seventh century AD text *Kadambari*, we learn about the involvement of a forest tribe Sabara in the procurement of diverse types of forest products including elephant tusks, animal hair, honey, animal meat, lions hide, peacock feathers (Ridding 1896: 29). Several of these commodities likely to have reached urban markets, where they had tended to fetch higher prices in early India. The same is supported by the *Dashakumaracarita* of Dandin (circa 700 AD), which mentions about a Kirata huntsman’s involvement in the trade (*vikriya*) of tiger-skins and

leather bags in the market of the city, Mahishmati (identified with Maheshwar on the bank of river Narmada) in central India (Kale 2009: 202-203, 361-362). Likewise, a story in the Jain text, *Samaraichchakaha* of Haribhadra Suri (dated 750 AD) narrates the interactions between a caravan trader (*sarthavaha*) Dharana and a Sabara chief Kalasena. Dharana, who was a son of a banker (setthi) Bandhudatta, is mentioned to have lived in a city of Makandi. Once, he met a Vidyadhara ('supernatural being with magical powers') in a forest on Uttarapatha and learnt about a medicine that could heal all types of fatal injuries. Later this medicine was used by Dharana to heal a Sabara chief Kalasena, who had been badly injured by a lion. With a caravan of traders, Dharana reached Achalapura, where he sold all his merchandise and then purchased several goods to sell in the markets of his native city, Makandi. While coming back, his caravan was attacked by an army of Sabaras and Bhilas in Kadamabari-atavi. Dharana was taken to Sabara chief Kalasena, who recognised him. Kalasena apologised for attacking caravan, sought Dharana's forgiveness, and gifted considerable wealth, comprising ivory, deerskins, etc., to Dharana (Jain 1996: 457-497).

This story whereas identifies traders with cities and markets, it portrays Sabara tribe as the master of forest and its wealth. In spite of their initial conflicts, trader Dharana is shown to have forged friendly ties with Sabaras and obtained from Sabara chief Kalasena diverse types of forest produce. Another story that underlines the control of forest tribes on forest produce is in Somadeva's *Kathasaritasagara* (circa 11th century AD), which describes the adventurous life of Vasudatta, son of a merchant from Valabhi in Gujarat. The retinue of Vasudatta is mentioned to have been attacked by Sabaras in a forest. Goods were looted and Vasudatta was taken to Durga's temple, where Sabara chief decided not to sacrifice him to worship the goddess. Subsequently, Vasudatta became a good friend of Sabara chief. Later, when this Sabara chief was captured by the king of Valabhi for attacking a caravan, Vasudatta saved his life by paying a huge amount of gold pieces for his release. In return, Sabara chief gifted forest produce including musk to Vasudatta as a token of gratitude (Penzer 1984: 141-149). Despite being a product of imaginary mind, these stories revolve around the friendship of traders and forest folks and highlight the

ways forest tribes having control over forest spaces provided diverse types of forest produce to traders, who lived in cities and traded the forest produce in urban markets. This is supported by Nandini Sinha Kapur's (2020: 44) study on the Bhils of Western India, which records that the Bhil tribesmen of Rajpipla had presented semi-precious agate (*manikyas*) procured from the Ratanpur mines to the Chalukya king Jayasimha (reign *circa* 1092-1144 AD), and the Bhil tribes in the same study are also shown to have been actively involved in the supply of medicinal plants and other forest products to local traders. In 1990s, certain ethno-archaeological studies were conducted in Gujarat on agate extraction and beadmaking processes, and these studies too highlight the key role of Bhil tribals in the mining, processing and supply of agates to 'the modern agate crafting industry in the centre at Khambhat in Gujarat state' (Gupta 2025: 276-278).

Conclusion

From the middle of the first millennium BC onwards, the emergence of monarchical polities in early India created conditions by subsuming rural (*grama*), urban (*nagara*, *pura*) and forest (*atavi*, *aranya*, *vana*, *jangala*) areas under their respective territories, for the formation of diverse types of relationships between/among rural, urban and forest populations, which controlled different types of resources of their respective areas (Guha 1999: 26-28; Chattopadhyaya 2004: 23-37). The resources that the forest tribes controlled were highly in demand in urban markets within as well as outside early India, and it encouraged early Indian rulers and traders to forge close ties with forest tribes to gain an access to varieties of forest produce (such as animal flesh, timber, elephants, ivory, animal skins, feathers, etc). Based on above discussion, it would not be wrong to say that members of different forest tribes had in varying capacities participated in the local as well as international trade networks, and owing of their intimate knowledge of forests and control over forest produce, 'they constituted a type of specialist primary producer of natural resource commodities' (Stiles 1993: 161) in early India.

End Notes

- ¹ The Major Rock Edict XIII records: ‘And the forest-folk who live in the dominions of the Beloved of the Gods, even them he entreats and exhorts in regard to their duty. It is hereby explained to them that, in spite of his repentance, the Beloved of the Gods possesses power enough to punish them for their crimes, so that they should turn away from evil ways and would not be killed for their crimes’ (Sircar, 2009: 45; Olivelle, 2023: 171).
- ² The Major Rock Edict XIII records: ‘...here in the dominions of His Majesty, the Beloved of the Gods- in the countaries of the Yavans and Kambojas, of the Nabhakas and Nabhapanktis, of the Bhoja-paitryainkas and of the Andhras and Paulindas - everywhere people are conforming to the instruction in Dharma imparted by the Beloved of the Gods’ (Sircar 2009: 45).
- ³ According to Irene Salvo (2005: 299), ‘malabathron could be identified as betel nut.’

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