

# CRITICALITY

**An Open Access Peer Reviewed Journal**

**Vol 4, No 1, June 2026**



**ACTIVISM FOUNDATION  
KOLKATA, INDIA**

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# Criticality

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## From the Desk of the Editor

It gives me great pleasure to announce the release of the June 2026 issue of our e-journal, *Criticality*. This issue has been made possible through the active support, care and cooperation of all concerned. *Criticality* is a peer-reviewed journal with an ISSN, Crossref membership and the facility to provide DOI links. All the articles published in *Criticality* are licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0 International. It has been regularly publishing work on important social questions. The journal seeks to cultivate scientific knowledge and critical thinking across the social sciences. It also carries forward the broader aims of Activism Foundation, Kolkata: to take research-based knowledge to people facing real-life difficulties, to encourage public awareness, and to challenge common-sense misconceptions, harmful practices and unreasonable beliefs. The present issue brings together scholars and contributors working on a wide range of personal, social, political, ecological and psychological concerns. We hope that these writings will help readers develop a more critical and informed understanding of everyday life.

Alisha Wahid, in her insightful article, studies the problem of stray dogs through the politics of space. She shows how anthropocentric attempts to impose order may deepen unequal vulnerabilities among both dogs and humans. Dr. Vandana Kumari, in “Lepcha Worldview versus State Development Discourse: The Lepcha Resistance to NHPC in North Sikkim,” examines the epistemological conflict between indigenous ecological knowledge systems and modern developmental paradigms through the Lepcha movement. Shivam Sintury, in “Understanding the Violent Conflict in Manipur: The Roots and Repercussions,” identifies the multiple factors behind the violence and suggests dialogue, equitable development, accountability, disarmament and trust-building across communities as alternatives to militarized containment.

Kajol Biswakarma, in “Leadership, Personality and Foreign Policy Decision-Making: A Comparative Analysis of Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping,” offers a comparative study of world leaders and their impact on international relations. Imran Khan, in “Ambedkar’s Constitution and the Question of Lived Experience in India: An Analysis,” discusses how Ambedkar sought to address the problems of everyday life through several constitutional propositions. Dr. Sreeparna Kar, in “Personality Traits, Coping Styles and Stress among College Students in Singur, West Bengal,” studies the relationship between personality traits, coping styles and stress among college students. Her article suggests that personality traits are closely linked with coping behaviour and that carefully designed psychological interventions may help students develop more adaptive coping styles.

Neha Sewa, in “A Sociological Study of the Quarter-life Crisis in the Film Dear Zindagi,” examines the quarter-life crisis from a sociological perspective and helps us understand its gendered causes and effects. She reads the film as a mirror of society. Dr. Sumantra Chakraborty, in “Studying Silences and Marginality: Micro-Narratives of Violence against Women from a Village in Purulia, West Bengal,” explores emotional, psychic and subtle forms of violence against women in a village in Purulia. Sabnur, in “Invisible Wounds, Silent Suffering: Health Implications of Psychological Violence on Married Women in Basirhat Block-2, West Bengal,” reflects on how psychological violence shapes the lives and health of married women. The article also suggests ways to reduce such violence through awareness, free counselling and support services, and by helping women move towards financial independence.

The issue also includes two important commentaries. Sayari Adhikari writes on the Aravalli Mountain Range and underlines the significance of ecological balance. Srijani Dutta’s commentary on Rabindranath Tagore’s *Dui Bigha Jami* revisits the moving story of a farmer whose land is deliberately occupied by a greedy and powerful zamindar. Finally, we are pleased to include a thought-provoking book review by Ananda Mohan Kar.

Acknowledging help is not a routine formality. It is a sincere recognition of the people who make a journal possible. I extend my gratitude to the Board of Trustees of Activism Foundation, the Advisors, Peer Reviewers and esteemed contributors for their support. I am especially thankful to Sri Tanay Dutta, Dy. Chief, Technical Support, for taking the trouble to type, arrange and format the writings carefully and in accordance with the journal guidelines. I also thank Manabendra Saha, Editorial Assistant, for scrutinising the technical aspects of the contributions.

I remain grateful to all the Deputy Editors: Dr. Amlan Lahiri, Dr. Titasha Sinha, Dr. Nivedita Raha, Dr. Chandrima Biswas, Dr. Ananya Chatterjee and Dr. Pinky Isha, for their sincere cooperation in completing this issue on time. I must also record my special thanks to the Managing Editor, Dr. Sumana Goswami, who carried much of the editorial responsibility with sincerity and care. Finally, I express my heartfelt gratitude to Dr. Sourish Jha, Chairman, Activism Foundation for Social Research and Action, for his insightful suggestions and guidance throughout the preparation of this issue. Any inadvertent omissions or typographical errors are mine alone.

Dr. Prantosh Sen  
Executive Editor

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## 'Stray' Dogs and the Politics of Space in Contemporary India: A Sociological Analysis <sup>1</sup>

Alisha Wahid <sup>2</sup>

The lives of free-ranging—or 'stray'—dogs are increasingly problematised in 21<sup>st</sup> century India. Apart from being considered a public health risk, people's general apathy towards their many misfortunes is frequently judged as unbecoming of a modern nation. The Supreme Court of India has in recent months leaned into the idea of their banishment from specific locations, fuelling debate about spatial politics. Narratives of control and/or care which accompany discussions of these dogs tend to downplay two crucial points: agency of the nonhuman, and heterogeneity of the anthropos. Drawing from field observations and secondary data from the internet, the present paper argues that rather than looking upon free-ranging dogs as merely a problem to solve, it might be more fruitful to regard the existing situation in terms of co-production. Dog-human conviviality and conflict are spun through multispecies encounters in agential space; they are not simply matters of human manipulation. Moreover, in analysing the issue as politics of space, the paper highlights how anthropocentric attempts at imposing order may worsen unequal vulnerabilities among dogs and humans alike through widening chasms between precarity and privilege, nonhuman and human, public and private, rural and urban, East and West.

**Keywords:** stray dogs, free-ranging dogs, politics of space, spatial agency, human-nonhuman relations, anthropocene

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The population of 'stray' dogs in India is generally estimated to be over 60 million, and they make up an amorphous category. While 'stray' refers most frequently to unowned dogs, it can enfold any that are deemed out of place, such as beloved community dogs who live on the streets, and even pets who are allowed to roam free (Animal Welfare Board of India, 2025; Karlekar, 2008). Due to this negative connotation of the term 'stray'—the denial of belonging and freedom of movement—the present paper will hereafter refer to such dogs as 'free-ranging' instead. Across India, free-ranging dogs are a common presence in and near human settlements, making the most of proximity by foraging in garbage dumps, seeking shelter in built spaces, receiving food and medical care from friendly humans, and not infrequently preying on livestock. People are generally tolerant of their existence and acknowledge the many benefits offered by free-ranging dogs: waste removal, rat control, security from human intruders, and keeping away dangerous wildlife. However, dogs are also recognised as a potential hazard as they are known to attack humans and pets, eat livestock, spread disease, cause traffic accidents, etc. Concerns regarding rabies transmission and mauling of vulnerable humans (children and elderly) loom especially large in discussions regarding India's overabundance of street dogs.

The presence of so many unowned and unaccompanied dogs in public spaces is against the ideals of modernity promoted by the West. Western ideas regarding modernisation and progress are rooted in nature-culture divide. They do not accept the intrusion of uncontrolled animals in zones marked off for the civilised. Accordingly, in Western countries, it is common practice to move 'stray' animals into designated shelters and to use euthanasia as a means of controlling their population. However, incarceration and culling are not only aimed at human convenience. These practices are also regarded as merciful as free-ranging dogs face countless dangers like starvation, exposure to the elements, traffic accidents, toxins, and harm by humans and other animals. For example, a study conducted in urban India found that 82% of pups born to the streets die before reaching the age of one year (Pal, 2001). It is believed that after economic liberalisation there has been a big change in the aspirations of Indian people. In particular, urban middle classes are now more demanding of modern comforts and aesthetics on par with



affluent Western countries (Singh, 2020). On the global stage, India is no longer content with survival and modest development but instead seeks to project the image of a rising world power. The existence of free-ranging dogs creates some hurdles when it comes to presenting a polished face in the global arena. Firstly, according to the 'developed' world's standards, the existence of free-ranging dogs signals an inability to maintain order. Secondly, Indians are judged as apathetic to the problems faced by free-ranging dogs. In July of 2025, the Supreme Court of India *suo moto* took up the matter of 'stray' dogs. The deliberations were sparked by a Times of India article (Saha, 2025) which reported the death of a child in Delhi after she was bitten by a rabid free-ranging dog. During the court hearings that followed, it was made clear that the Indian Supreme Court regarded control of free-ranging dogs as urgently required for ensuring public safety. On August 11, 2025, the Supreme Court ordered removal of free-ranging dogs from Delhi and National Capital Region. It ordered that the dogs must be relocated from public spaces to dog shelters (Supreme Court, 2025a). This decision by the court led to protests and many pointed out the impracticality of the order. The ruling was then modified on August 22<sup>nd</sup> allowing dogs to be released after sterilisation, vaccination and deworming, unless they displayed aggressive behaviour or were suspected to carry rabies (Supreme Court, 2025a). On November 7, 2025, the Court provided new rules to be implemented all over the country (Supreme Court, 2025b). The new rules call for permanent removal of free-ranging dogs from some designated 'institutional areas': educational institutions, healthcare centres, sports complexes, bus depots and train stations. At the time of writing of this paper, the final verdict on the matter is yet 'reserved', but the given Supreme Court orders have created uncertainty for dog-human relations. Thus, the fate of millions of Indian dogs hinges on the questions that muddle the lives of so many others in today's world: 'who can be where, and what can they do there?' (Clewer et al., 2012, p. 1).

The present paper undertakes an analysis of dog-human conviviality and conflict from the perspective of spatial politics. In contemporary India, dogs are one of many victims of 'the operation of power through space and place, and the spatial structuring of inequality' (Clewer et al., 2012, p. 6). Other sacrifices made upon the altar of 'development'

include factory farms, environmental devastation, displacement of villagers for public works projects, the erosion of common property resources, and dispossession of slum dwellers. The recent Supreme Court deliberations regarding dogs have fuelled debate regarding the politics of space. The court rulings support an exclusionary vision of modern India. Although the Supreme Court looks at free-ranging dogs through the lens of human-dog binary, the present paper is in agreement with those who frame the matter in terms of heterogeneity and more-than-human co-production. Thus, the present paper will analyse the spatial politics around free-ranging Indian dogs keeping in mind that: i. dogs and humans are not opposed, homogeneous categories, and ii. dog-human relations cannot simply be dictated by some humans ignoring the reality that relations are shaped also by dogs themselves and the spaces where interactions occur. The paper uses both primary and secondary data in order to examine the following points:

- i. How spatial changes introduced by humans (built environments and governance of space) affect the lives of free-ranging dogs and their relationship with humans.
- ii. The ways in which nonhuman agency can challenge human attempts to control space and dog lives.
- iii. Divisions among humans that intertwine into dog-related spatial politics.

## Review of literature

Some academics argue that free-ranging dogs should not be called 'stray'. Because, as discussed previously, the term 'stray' implies out-of-placeness and it criminalises the existence of dogs who are not owned or supervised by humans (Srinivasan, 2013). So, terms like 'street dogs' and 'free-living dogs' are encouraged (Srinivasan et al., 2019). The present paper uses 'free-ranging' which is inclusive of varying degrees of human claim upon dogs. Most free-ranging dogs in India belong to an ancient indigenous breed called Pye, Indian Pariah, Indie, or simply *Desi*. Recently, in urban areas especially, there is an influx of commercial breeds either because of pet abandonment or due to interbreeding (Rai, 2025). Elimination of free-ranging dogs has been part of

modernisation efforts in many countries (Gundogdu, 2018). The elimination of dogs is tied to genuine public health concerns, but it may also be a way for the state to lay claim upon spaces and showcase smooth functioning in different facets of governance, such as sanitation and providing security to citizens (Gundogdu, 2018). Dogs are generally thought of as loving, loyal, and friendly creatures. Positive assumptions are also made regarding their owners. For example, dog owners are often thought to be more social than cat owners (Cudworth, 2017). Herzog (2011) notes that media tends to overreport the positive effects—physical and psychological health benefits—of pet ownership. Thus, ownership of docile dogs as pets has a pleasant halo. But when it comes to ‘stray’ dogs, the situation is different. Stray dogs are often thought of as dangerous and the media has been accused of excessive negative reporting regarding them (Karlekar, 2008; Ramanujan, 2015). In the Indian context, human relations with free-ranging dogs are complex and have many different and interesting aspects. Often, dogs are considered a part of the community and appreciated for the services they provide (protection, pest control, etc.), especially among low-income sections (Bhalla et al., 2021; Srinivasan et al., 2019). Unlike gated communities, low-income neighbourhoods are generally more accessible to free-ranging dogs, and the proximity can inspire sympathy and acts of kindness. Nonetheless, proximity also translates to greater risk, which human inhabitants of such localities seem aware of (Herbert et al., 2012). Srinivasan et al. (2019), for instance, show that dogs may simultaneously be thought of as vulnerable creatures who have a right to live on the streets as well as a nuisance. Also, the literature amply demonstrates that, among humans, the poor are at greatest risk of contracting and dying from rabies (Srinivasan et al., 2019). It would seem that dog ownership in India is more common among higher socio-economic sections (Brill et al., 2024); and prevalence of pet dogs is expected to increase alongside demographic changes associated with modernisation, such as gender parity in education and employment, and smaller family size (Volsche et al., 2019). But while discussing possible trends, two important points need to be remembered. First, dogs cannot be simply categorised as either owned or unowned. Across India, there are millions of free-ranging dogs who are looked after as community animals (Srinivasan et al., 2019). Second, pet ownership among poor and

‘under-developed’ people is often overlooked (Serpell, 1987). For example, poor people who own pet dogs may not have big enough homes to keep dogs indoors, they may not put collars on their dogs, and their dogs are often of the ‘street dog’ breeds. So, the pet dogs of the poor may be indistinguishable from ownerless free-ranging dogs (Ghosh, 2024; see also Karlekar, 2008). This may strengthen the impression that pet keeping increases with socio-economic and demographic changes.

Thus, there is a difference in attitude towards supervised pets and ‘stray’ dogs, and the type of pet one owns can lead to assumptions about the owner. It is also clear that ‘human’ and ‘dog’ are not uniform categories, and that individuals within them are judged according to different ideologies as being appropriate or savage. So, in this context, it seems important to critically examine how dogs come to be designated as ‘stray’ and the consequences it has for dogs and humans.

## **Methods**

The study is based on field observations and analysis of Reddit social media posts. Primary data for this paper is derived from observation of dog-human relations in different parts of West Bengal. For the most part, these observations were not undertaken with specific research goals in mind but were instead accumulated over three decades of residing in, travelling to, and speaking with people from various parts of West Bengal. Observation was facilitated by the ubiquity of free-ranging dogs and a personal desire to understand their habits and their relationship with humans. The researcher was able to collect data by spending time in the company of dogs and by talking to people who expressed fondness or dislike towards them. People from various walks of life—NGO volunteers, train hawkers, university professors, livestock rearers, homemakers, security guards, etc.—shared their thoughts and enriched the study. Analysis of Reddit posts focused mainly on (but was not restricted to) people’s reactions to the recent Supreme Court rulings. Content from four high-traffic Indian subreddits (forums) and two subreddits related to Indian dogs and pets were analysed. The chosen subreddits are as follows: r/India (872,000), r/indiasocial (663,000), r/indiameme (445,000), r/AskIndia (384,000), r/IndianPets (39,000), and r/Indiedogs (33,000) (weekly visitors) —at the time of writing this paper in March, 2026—are given in brackets). Search

terms like 'dogs', 'stray dogs', 'street dogs' and 'Supreme Court' were employed and it was decided that a minimum of ten threads from each forum would be studied, contingent on availability. Posts dated from August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2025 to March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2026, were considered for analysis, with a preference for posts with higher engagement (greater number of comments and upvotes). Although other social media platforms, like Facebook, are more popular in India, Reddit was chosen because it is anonymous. The researcher hoped that anonymity might encourage greater frankness.

Examination of secondary data focused primarily on the following themes: consequences of proximity, rights of human and nonhuman animals, desire for progress, references to wealth disparity, opinion of government, and thoughts regarding religion. Data analysis tried to highlight the more-than-human nature of society. It also tried to make room for the interrogation of various inequalities. Thus, the focus is on living with dogs, not thinking through them as symbols (Haraway, 2016). The present exercise does not run under the steam of any utopian dreams; it merely seeks to loosen the hold of certain dominant ideas so that the search for gentler alternatives can breathe more freely. The methodology of this paper has both strengths and weaknesses. Primary data is largely derived from ordinary life experiences, unaffected by the artificiality associated with methods like survey and interview. On the other hand, employing a more systematic approach would have doubtless enhanced the paper's credibility, and made it more generalisable. To make up for this deficiency, field observations have been contextualised with the help of available academic literature, news articles, etc.

### **An Anthropocene conundrum**

The domestication of *Canis lupus familiaris* dates back at least 15,000 years (Haraway, 2016). Dogs have been a part of human society for millennia, as protectors, hunting partners, and companions. They have been comrades to kings and beggars alike, and have at times been interred alongside humans indicating emotional trans-species bonds as well as dogs' status as 'spiritually significant beings' (Morey & Jeger, 2022). Yet, even as pets, they remain to this day with one paw in nature, granted only ambiguous citizenship of the human world that has transcended conditions of animality and

wilderness (Redmalm, 2013; see also Shir-Vertesh, 2012). Dogs labelled as 'stray' are generally denied even that. 'Stray' dogs are aberrant to both nature and culture; they are too intertwined with human society to be honoured as nature, yet they are still regarded as an animal *other*. Lately, in India, dogs' *other* status has been enhanced due to increasing news reporting of horrific dog attacks on humans (e.g. Saha, 2025) and growing concerns over their population increase amidst the country's poor waste management. The increasing number of free-ranging dogs not only raises concerns about human safety but because they face so many risks, their lives are considered an animal welfare crisis. The present era is sometimes called the Anthropocene, and in it these creatures present us with a conundrum. A compassionate but resource-intensive approach to dog control would be measures like Animal Birth Control (ABC) programme and putting dogs in shelters. Another option is culling. The former is a kind of favouritism that is problematic given that humans have already caused a lot of damage to the planet. After all, kind treatment of dogs generally comes at an environmental cost (Clayton & Myers, 2015) and free-ranging dogs are a threat to wildlife (Ladon & Dolma, 2025). Killing them, on the other hand, is a different, much more straightforward, sort of Anthropocene violence. The term Anthropocene has many criticisms. Among them: i. the term perhaps heightens notions of human exceptionalism and mastery, undermining the entangled nature of life (Haraway, 2008); and ii. in blaming humankind as a whole, the term is accused of neglecting human heterogeneity and the specific drivers of ecological ruination (Mitman, 2019). The spatial politics of dog-human relations reflect these criticisms and are worth pondering over. The proliferation of free-ranging dogs has anthropogenic roots but the issue is a runaway one. In India, socio-spatial changes like growing consumption and urbanisation often couple with poor governance in making spaces conducive to canine population growth. Spaces built for humans become home to a host of other species, including dogs. Dogs' friendly nature and functional roles also factor into the situation as they are appreciated and rewarded by humans. Thus, dog-human relations are co-produced. They are not simply decided by humans.

The researcher was talking to a toto driver who feeds neighbourhood dogs. He said:

Every morning when I open my doors, the dogs are there. They look at me. This morning I gave them tea and muri (puffed rice).

His home does not have a gate separating the house and yard from the street. Therefore, it is easily accessible to the village dogs. They often shelter on his property. Thus, the space itself enables dogs to seek resources. However, as society 'progresses', homes are becoming more exclusive, with walls and gates keeping out community dogs and many other creatures. Other species also play a role in dog-human relations. Apart from the fear of rabies, the hunting of livestock and poultry are a common problem in rural areas. The same man told the researcher on another occasion:

Sometimes people get angry and hit the dogs because they eat so many animals. I also lost four hens and one goat in the last few months. I give the dogs leftover food and even buy food for their puppies, but still they hunt the animals. I wish there were only a few dogs, one or two. But there are too many.

The problem of dog overpopulation is often discussed on Reddit both by people who like and dislike free-ranging dogs. Frequently, people report being overwhelmed by their numbers. On the r/Indiedogs forum, there are countless requests made to posters to get dogs under their care sterilised. Users are often reminded that feeding is only the first step towards responsible engagement. Apart from dissuading notions of human mastery over the world, the question of free-ranging dogs highlights that the so-called Anthropocene is dominated by some sections of humans. Not all humans get equal say, nor all suffer the consequences equally. As with environmentalism, dog-human relations in India are embedded into material struggles (Guha, 1989); and while poor folks are generally more in danger of disease and mauling, eradication of free-ranging dogs may be a cosmetic measure that merely heightens other problems suffered by them. Academic literature and field observations suggest that economically disadvantaged people rely on free-ranging dogs for safety more than wealthier humans. Ramanujan (2015) suggests that since slum dwellers are underserved by the government, they rely

disproportionately on dogs to alert them to the presence of helpful and unhelpful visitors: NGO and municipal workers, gangsters, police, burglars, etc. Dogs are also known to drive away other species whose presence is generally unwanted by humans, such as rodents, snakes, crocodiles, etc. (Ghosh, 2024; Karlekar, 2008).

Some years ago, a woman residing in a low-income rural neighbourhood told the researcher that the woman's neighbour's house had nearly been broken into by jackals. Her village was experiencing a sudden increase in jackal activity and those with flimsy homes (like the woman's neighbour) were more at risk. Then one night the local free-ranging dogs were heard making concerted efforts to drive away the jackals, and for some time afterwards the jackals stayed away from the village. Although dogs can also be a problem, many people recognise that they keep away worse dangers. The Supreme Court's order to keep dogs out of educational institutions may have a negative impact in rural areas where snakes and other wildlife are a threat. In urban areas also, dogs are now a part of ecosystems (Ghosh & Narlikar, 2026). In India, government services are often not adequate, so people have to rely on informal networks for support. So, dogs and humans have co-evolved lifeways. For example, advocate Poulomi Shukla pointed out during the court hearings that street dogs protect homeless children and act as their 'last line of defence' (Mondal, 2026). Also, floods of comments on Reddit cry out that most serious problems faced by the nation—poverty, environmental problems, increase in hate crimes, corruption, etc.—will not be solved by harassing dogs. These ground realities cannot be ignored. Dog-human relations here should not be based on West-centric ideas ignoring the local situation. Tsing and Haraway (Mitman, 2019) say that the term 'Anthropocene' should be used in a narrower sense to reflect the disproportionate impact that some humans and ideas have over the planet. If we apply that reframing to the analysis of free-ranging dogs, it becomes easier to appreciate that free-ranging dogs are not simply a 'problem' for humans. It becomes easier to see that dogs and humans are heterogeneous and their relations are complex.

**The varied textures of othering**



The politics of space is not only about law and state machinery. It manifests in everyday interactions among ordinary members of a diverse society. As the status of dogs fluctuates between acceptance and intolerance, there are also conditions that make some humans unacceptable and 'other'. An interesting feature of dog ownership in India is that even owned dogs are often allowed to roam freely. So, it may be hard to distinguish between owned dogs and unowned ones. This practice seems to be losing favour, however, and the reasons range from cultural influences which infantilise dogs, growing popularity of frail commercial-breed pets, and spatial changes that favour indoor accommodation—larger homes, increasing vehicular traffic, etc. Once near-universal, free-ranging dog ownership today is perhaps more common among the lower socio-economic sections whose conviviality with canines tends to be neglected (Ghosh, 2024; Karlekar, 2008). Nowadays, there may be a growing tendency to look down upon the practice of letting pets roam freely. Instead, the idea that dogs are like children who need to be controlled and showered with commodified care seems to be gaining hold (Yadav, 2025). In this context, the spatiality of dogs—proximity to human supervision, whether allowed on laps and furniture, being taken along on holidays, etc.—has consequences for their humans and risks entrenching the misconception that love for pets/dogs is a full-belly phenomenon. Since pet ownership is associated with a number of positive traits (e.g. altruism and modern sensibilities), the misconception can be quite damning (Berglund, 2014; Nast, 2006; Serpell & Paul, 2011). Free-ranging dogs are considered a threat to supervised pets. Many pet dog owners complain that presence of free-ranging dogs makes it difficult to take pets out for walks. Thus, delicate and docile pets are contrasted against uncontrolled dogs. In this way, dogs who live in the streets are labelled as being unworthy of being on the streets compared to the pets who only pass through. By contrast, for humans, it is said that people who spend time in the streets need to be protected. Dog welfare activists are frequently dismissed as rich people who ride around in cars. It is said that they don't face problems faced by free-ranging dogs. However, in one affluent gated community in Kolkata, its twenty-two well-

fed resident dogs are a problem for both wealthy residents and poorer visitors. Because of them, human residents can't enjoy morning or evening walks. Also, the dogs often attack delivery persons, resulting in bites, falls, and broken bones. Many wealthy human residents feel that the dogs are an extension of upper-class hubris inflicted on less fortunate humans. A commonly recommended way of controlling the free-ranging dog population is better waste management and cessation of dog feeding. In contrast, saying that human overpopulation should be controlled by starving people is likely to draw serious condemnation. Revered British broadcaster David Attenborough has been criticised for saying that it is 'barmy' to send aid to starving people in 3<sup>rd</sup> world countries (Furness, 2013). Famines, according to him, indicate a simple imbalance in the population-to-land ratio, which Asians and Africans have upset through mindless overbreeding (Furness, 2013). On a similar note, Winston Churchill made light of the Bengal famine by saying that Indians breed like rabbits (Safi, 2019). Parallels are often drawn between violence against other animals and the oppression inflicted by some humans upon others in the form of racism, colonialism, patriarchy, ableism, etc. And, it is noted that language plays a crucial role in the othering—of humans and nonhumans—that accompanies oppression. With regard to dogs in India, the media, courts, and general public are often united in evoking the 'chaos', 'danger', and 'divide' posed by 'strays'. A Supreme Court bench commented that no one can read a dog's mind, nor predict when they may bite (Dogra, 2026), as though the same is not true of humans. Othering makes violence more palatable.

However, it is not enough to draw parallels between the two kinds of othering and violence: as many have discussed, the nonhuman is doubly vulnerable under the weight of animality and third-world citizenship. In a poverty-stricken country like India, welfare of dogs is not high priority—a fact made painfully clear through a number of comments made by Supreme Court judges (e.g. Mondal, 2026). As canine suffering and death are less likely to move law enforcement, dogs can easily become surrogates for violence. One dog feeder near Burdwan, West Bengal, expressed fear that the dogs might someday be poisoned by a person whose family

is embroiled in property dispute with hers. Religion ought to also be discussed as it is a great force in India, and animal welfare discussions are frequently engulfed by the construction of Hindu Rashtra—e.g. bovine protection and politicised vegetarianism. The atmosphere of general tolerance towards free-ranging dogs tends to be attributed to Hinduism, which is followed by almost eighty percent of Indians (e.g. Wallen, 2023). But this perspective perhaps relies too heavily on the book view, and it risks further marginalising religious minorities. The toto driver quoted in the previous section is Muslim; he and a number of his Muslim neighbours are friendly with the local dogs. Instead of forcing people like him into assumed contrasts between indigenous holism and 'alien' Abrahamic human exceptionalism, it might be wiser to heed their own interpretations of their faith (Berglund, 2014). Simplistic terminology like 'dog lover' and 'dog hater' are abundant in rageful Reddit comments. They obfuscate common ground that exists among different sections of people on the matter of free-ranging dogs. For instance, there is general desire for canine population reduction (if not elimination), and to supplant reliance on them with appropriate alternatives. Meanwhile, we must make do with thin alliances.

### **Tendrils of formalisation**

Formalisation here means increasing emphasis on systematic, rule-bound administration by the state machinery. In this section, government's rules regarding dogs are contrasted against some prevalent informal ways of getting by. In India, unowned/abandoned and community dogs are governed by the Animal Birth Control (ABC) Rules of 2023 (Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry and Dairying, 2023). The ABC programme tries to ensure dog-human coexistence through sterilisation, vaccination, deworming, and responsible feeding. ABC rules prohibit relocation or incarceration of dogs (unless they are rabid or aggressive). And killing dogs is only allowed if a dog is mortally ill or injured. The programme has been successful where it has been taken up seriously (Karlekar, 2008). But efforts to implement it have been inadequate (Karlekar, 2008). The Supreme

Court's order of November 7, 2025, is said to contradict the ABC rules. Also, the order has been criticised as 'an act of administrative violence' because 'it comes with knowledge' (Gandhi, 2025). In August the court had reversed an order of mass dog incarceration because it realised infrastructure does not exist to make it possible (Gandhi, 2025). The World Health Organisation (2012) says mass vaccination and sterilisation are good ways of controlling dog population and reducing rabies deaths. Sporadic removal is known to cause more problems than it solves. The vacuum is simply filled by dogs from other territories, and newcomer dogs struggling to establish themselves are more likely to be aggressive (Karlekar, 2008, p. 80). Thus, the Supreme Court directives, it may be said, fail to take into account the worldview of dogs and their relationship with space. The ABC rules and Indian Supreme Court call for establishment of convenient feeding zones. Feeding zones are meant to reduce conflict by allowing dog feeders to administer care without causing harassment to other humans. The Standard Operating Procedure for dog feeding in urban West Bengal goes so far as to suggest healthy food options for canines and convenient feeding times: before 7 a.m. and after 7 p.m. (Department of Urban Development and Municipal Affairs, 2024). But it is interesting to note how establishment of feeding zones may go against the grain of existing relations which are shaped by humans and dogs through their specific relations with spaces. Feeding zone may work in a quiet residential area but it may work less well at a busy travel hub. Places like bus depots and train stations have certain features that contradict this sort of ordering. Such places are generally experienced by people only fleetingly. Which means people will likely share food with dogs where they meet instead of looking for feeding zones and waiting for the allotted hours. A lot of food waste is generated at such places because of the presence of food shops and sanitation is generally not good. The waste may sustain dogs without intentional feeding by humans. Also, such places tend to inflict disabilities on dogs which makes it more unlikely for people to follow rules regarding only feeding in designated areas. Of course, the Supreme Court says dogs should be removed from train and bus stations but that is not feasible (Gandhi,

2025). It is worth noting that these contrary conditions are also true of busy urban streets from where dogs are not directed to be removed (Economic Times, 2026). Informal handling of dog-human relations also comes with problems. Dogs are illegally killed for many reasons like revenge, making noise at night, looking sick and unclean, and simple human amusement. The ABC rules allow people to protest such acts of violence. The Supreme Court's anti-dog stance makes many fearful that dogs and dog caretakers will now face more harassment in spite of existing rules that protect them. ABC rules allow capture of aggressive and diseased dogs. Given the Supreme Court's stance, some fear that the rule may be misused because there is not much clarity about what counts as aggression. In general, people excuse behaviour like snarling and chasing when a dog is protecting babies. When fights break out among dogs, people often take sides based on things like which dog is known to be more docile and whose territory was invaded by whom. But misjudged violence by humans is also very common. In the researcher's village some years ago a female dog was poisoned by someone for killing livestock. The dog had recently given birth to some puppies. No one expressed sorrow for the dead mother. But some of the villagers then took pity on the orphaned litter and gave them food. The puppies did not survive for long. In different forms, violence is present in the relationships among dogs, humans and spaces. For example, at a small train station in rural West Bengal, the canine population is kept in check by trains, traffic accidents, and predation by jackals, despite efforts made by people to keep the dogs, especially puppies, safe. The manageable number enhances dog-human conviviality to an extent not observable in nearby localities (there is no ABC programme). The nature of the place makes for smooth relations in other ways also. People who care for the dogs—train hawkers, shop owners, the station master, toto drivers, travellers, etc.—do not live there and so are not much troubled by barking at odd hours; nor can there be much confusion about whether they own the dogs and therefore all the mischief caused by them. The rural nature of the place also enhances coexistence through relaxation of rules. There are no ticket checkers, no one to enforce rules about smoking, playing cards, relaxing on the

overbridge, or feeding dogs. In the evenings especially, the station is used to socialise. Food is shared with dogs at the tea shops.

Over time the station has gone through many changes, much of which benefits its resident dogs but has made the place inhospitable to other creatures. About fifteen years ago one could from time to time find goats, cows, crabs, caterpillars, etc. on or near the platforms. Nowadays the station is largely devoid of plants and other critters. But there are more places where dogs can shelter. Human ideas have without a doubt shaped the world and altered more-than-human relations. But it is interesting to see that there are limits to our mastery over the world, even in places shaped by humans. In future, free-ranging dogs may not be present in public places. But for now, life continues as usual despite faraway court discussions.

### **The thorny question of sacrifice**

The debates over free-ranging dogs foreground some important considerations, such as: Who has the right to exist in 'our' world? And, what measures are acceptable to bring about 'our' vision of society? One person shared a story of argument breaking out between the owners of a *roti* shop and a couple of customers over the feeding of dogs. The customers used to share food bought from the shop with some street dogs in front of the shop. The story was told to the researcher as an example of clashing human worldviews in urban areas where space is scarce. But we should not lose sight of the fact that our worldviews have serious impact on dog lives. Feeding can have unintended consequences. Dog fights can increase if feeders force them to encroach on each other's territories (Narayanan, 2016). Some people say that fights increase during and after unintended dog feasts—such as food waste dumped near wedding pandals or other big gatherings—as dogs from different areas converge. Critics of (nonhuman) animal welfare often dismiss dogs as vermin who consume waste generated by humans, as do cockroaches and rats. However, limiting our circle of sympathy to the 'human' is not an easy solution because even among humans some lives are valued more than others.

In India, mass killing of dogs has been done from time to time through brutal methods like poisoning, electrocution, and negligence (Karlekar, 2008). People justifying such actions often cite the prevalence of euthanasia in the West. But in India the sudden removal of free-ranging dogs may cause more problems for humans than it solves. It is known that sporadic killing has little long-term effect on dog population. In fact, the creation of vacuums increases conflict (Karlekar, 2008). So, to eradicate free-ranging dogs, systematic culling needs to be done all over the country and within a relatively short period of time. But there are over 60 million free-ranging dogs in India. And since the nation's waste management is already very poor, dealing with a dog massacre is likely to prove disastrous even from a human health perspective. It should also be remembered that dogs protect people in various ways. And their removal will negatively impact some sections of humans more than others. As with environmentalism, ideas and policies cannot simply be transplanted from the West (Guha, 1989); they need to be adapted to local conditions. The ABC programme is generally regarded as a conscionable approach to dog population control, and it would allow precious time to humans and dogs. Advocating on behalf of ABC, one Redditor posted:

Why should they guard ungrateful humans for generations who themselves don't like community dogs at all?

On the same thread, other comments stated that sterilisation protects dogs, and that if any problems are exacerbated by extinction of free-ranging dogs, the ill-effects are for humans to deal with. Scholars like Srinivasan (2013) and Narayanan (2016) warn against over-enthusiasm when promoting ABC. They point out that sterilisation is risky for dogs. The ABC programme is also risky for humans and wildlife since it means continued presence of free-ranging dogs, at least for a while. No matter how we weigh the pros and cons, the consequences of any decision will be distributed unequally among heterogeneous humans, dogs, and other lives. People sometimes make sarcastic comments about rural-urban difference when it comes to living alongside nonhuman animals. They joke that city people cannot tolerate dogs but they lecture rural people about the need to learn

coexistence with dangerous wildlife. The rural is often thought of as more inclusive of the nonhuman, so the problems of rural people are often neglected when it comes to free-ranging dogs. ABC units are generally in urban areas, but the rural stands to lose more due to unchecked dog population growth (Adhya, 2026). Rural communities have less easy access to healthcare and they harbour more biodiversity that may be threatened by dogs. Thus, there is an urban bias in dog governance efforts. Sadly, many Reddit users believe that relocation of dogs to jungles or villages is a good way of solving dog overpopulation in cities. Meanwhile, rural communities have already suffered due to nonhuman animal relocations from urban areas (Govindrajan, 2018; see also Bhan & Bose, 2020). When Turkey was trying to eradicate free-ranging dogs as a modernising nation, thousands of dogs were relocated to a hostile island. There they died from hunger, thirst, heat, and fighting. Later, many Turks believed that there were calamities suffered by the nation because of those dogs' curses (Alkan, 2016). '*Bhogoban achen*' (god exists), said a veterinarian's assistant, while injecting the researcher's pet with a vaccine, some years ago when Kerala was hit by some natural calamity after stories of horrific violence towards dogs had been making the rounds in the news. Such cries from the heart are far from rare. Yet, we must remember that dogs are one of many victims of the Anthropocene, and regardless of which road we favour, it is likely to draw the contempt of one god or another.

### Concluding remarks

Since social media posts were analysed as part of this exercise, it seems prudent to mention that the nature of online spaces, too, can enhance divisions by creating echo chambers that keep out opposing viewpoints and make it difficult to empathise with the disagreeing other. Against the grain of polarisation, it is hoped that the present paper has been able to highlight diverse nuances of dog-human relations in present-day India without losing sight of the special vulnerability of dogs vis-à-vis human caprice. The study did not set out to make prescriptions about human-nonhuman relations, nor to accomplish the oft-touted goal of filling a gap in existing academic literature. It has been an attempt to contribute to a



complex and dynamic conversation regarding a problem with no easy solution. As so frequently happens in our quests to improve the world, one set of risks may simply be replaced by another. The researcher hopes to have done a somewhat adequate job of representing dogs, humans, and spaces as agential, non-monolithic entities in the politics of space.

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## Lepcha Worldview Versus State Development Discourse: The Lepcha Resistance to NHPC in North Sikkim <sup>1</sup>

Vandana Kumari <sup>2</sup>

This paper explores the epistemological conflict between indigenous ecological knowledge systems and modern developmental paradigms through a sociological analysis of the Lepcha tribe's resistance to hydroelectric projects in Dzongu, North Sikkim. The Lepchas, who are acknowledged as Sikkim's original inhabitants view nature as their God, totem and holy being embedded in their cosmology, myths, and everyday practices. This clash embodies a deeper epistemic tension between bioregional consciousness which values ecological reciprocity and modern developmental rationality (one-dimensional approach) which prioritizes market profit. Drawing upon different sociological theories to understand the context sociologically, this paper argues that the Lepcha movement is to protect and preserve an entire worldview that intertwines ecology, culture and sacred spirituality around their space. Their conflict is a confrontation between two conceptually different knowledge systems. This paper examines this epistemological conflict, highlighting how local ecological worldviews challenge the dominant developmental discourse against National Hydro-Power Project Corporation. The ethnographic study technique is the main aspect of the qualitative research design that have been used for this research. Key respondents (such as healers, elderly people, youth leaders etc.) are chosen for in-depth knowledge about place and the space.

**Keywords:** bioregionalism, epistemological conflict, NHPC, and indigenous knowledge

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India's contemporary development trajectory, particularly in the domain of green or sustainable energy has been significantly shaped by an increasing reliance on large-scale hydropower projects across the Himalayan region. Within this national framework, the state of Sikkim and more specifically, the sacred Teesta river basin has emerged as a focal point for intensive dam construction. These projects are mostly governed by the National Hydro- Power Project Corporation (NHPC) that is embedded within a broader discourse of universal development that primarily includes energy security, economic growth and infrastructural modernization (Government of India, 2019). However, these techno-economic narratives clash with a drastically different indigenous worldview in the Dzongu region, an officially recognized ancestral homeland for the Lepchas, where rivers and mountains are alive, holy, and essential to collective cultural identity. From sociological perspectives, however these dominant development narratives are deeply contested and intertwined within structures of power, knowledge and inequality. Drawing on insights from political ecology, it becomes evident that environmental governance is intrinsically linked to questions of access, control and the distribution of resources (Robbins, 2012). Hydropower development in the Himalayan region exemplifies what scholars describe as the "resource frontier" (Tsing, 2005), where peripheral landscapes inhabited by indigenous communities are incorporated into the circuits of capital and state-led development. In this process, local ecologies are reconfigured into sites of extraction, often marginalizing the voices and life worlds of indigenous populations.

This paper situates the Lepcha resistance within a framework of epistemological conflict: between indigenous ecological knowledge and modern scientific knowledge. It explores how contrasting epistemologies produce divergent assessments of risk, value, and legitimacy in socio-ecological governance. Development projects in ecologically fragile zones often create not only environmental disturbances but also epistemological ruptures along with Lepcha's emotional and symbolic meaning towards their sacred ecology and Lepcha's savior and guardian Mountain Kanchanjungha. The Lepchas of Dzongu, North

Sikkim, have long resisted the NHPC projects on the grounds that these threaten both their environment and their cultural-spiritual identity. Dzongu traditionally considered a *Mayel Lyang*, the holy land of origin of the Lepcha community is a living landscape of myths, memories, and ecological harmony. The conflict between the Lepchas and NHPC represents more than a political or economic disagreement; it is a confrontation between two extremely different knowledge systems: one that views the river, forests, groves and mountain as sacred and life-giving, and another that sees it as a resource to be harnessed for economic and commercial benefit. This paper examines this epistemological conflict through a sociological and anthropological lens, highlighting how local ecological worldviews challenge the dominant developmental discourse. It can be seen that Lepcha tribal movement, in this context, one of the important examples of academic and sociological discourse and debate around post-development philosophy versus universal model of development. The debates between two ideologies deal with different approaches and perspectives to trace the concept of development, without looking at the regional disparities and tries to impose the one-dimensional approach of development. In this way, only Lepcha people or other minorities suffered in terms of loss of their indigenous knowledge tradition, culture, and their environment that is the means of their subsistence due to the state-sponsored development initiatives. The mainstream literature on 'development' mainly ignores tribal culture, their folklores and their identity related to the distinct geography. Here the role of 'bioregionalism' is very significant to understand the Lepchas perception of development in the context of their regional based knowledge. The concept "bioregionalism" basically emphasis on placed based knowledge that helps to provide cultural survival, inclusive economic growth (through farming and agriculture like millet and other local products) and environment sustainability to protect regional place and space. In against to the state-sponsored development homogenization project, basically this research has attempted to explore tribal interpretations of their own narratives, stories and ecology to their everyday life through different practices, and also their perceptions



of development along with cultural and emotional connection of ecology.

Resistance has been analyzed with counter-questions, and alternative development models based on place-based/geographical-based knowledge have also been explored. In addition, the transmission of traditional and indigenous knowledge across generations has been explored. The idea of bioregionalism has emerged as a key paradigm in ecological philosophy and practice in response to the increasing problems of environmental degradation, climate change, and modern society's alienation from its ecological ecosystems. Bioregionalism, which stresses localism, ecological knowledge, and cultural identity, is based on the concept that sustainable existence necessitates a symbiotic interaction between human cultures and their natural areas. The recent Montreal-Kunming agreement on biodiversity conservation in 2022 in which India is a very important country to teach the world 'how to preserve the ecological biodiversity' through their enriched Indian Knowledge System that includes the diversity and ecological specific socio-economic life in Hindu worldview and the vast diverse indigenous cultural knowledge in various tribal communities that can only be explored through their own understanding of bioregionalism.

### **Sociological Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

The Major research questions of the study are:

1. What are tribal explanations for their environmental surroundings?
2. How do tribal communities explain their sustainability in relation to ecology and the environment?
3. How do tribal communities construct cultural explanations of identity in relation to ecology and the environment?
4. What is the nature of the counter-dialogue by the tribal community against the state development discourse?

The present study is a qualitative study employing cross-sectional research in mapping the local narratives and existing counter-narratives developed by the Lepcha community in response to external interventions, especially state-

sponsored modern development projects such as NHPC. It attempts to explore and analyze the epistemological conflict between Lepcha understanding of their bioregionalism and ecologically sustainable way of life and the state understanding of ecology and environment under the umbrella of modernization and development. The study also followed micro-sociological theories such as symbolic interactionism and phenomenological understanding of people's life world and their social construction of meaning towards ecology and environment. The central focus of the study lies in examining the Lepcha life-world through their cognitive mapping of place, ecology, and identity, as articulated in their social and cultural narratives. These counter-narratives reflect an epistemological resistance to universalized models of development and highlight indigenous understandings of 'bioregionalism' rooted in place-based knowledge and cultural practices. Ethnographic method was employed to capture the depth and complexity of lived experiences of the people. Data collection involved unstructured interviews, in-depth conversations, oral histories, and participant observation. Respondents were selected from diverse social categories, including elders, women, youth, farmers, activists, bonthings (traditional religious practitioners), and social workers, ensuring representation across gender, occupation, and social roles. Content analysis was used as a key technique to interpret local narratives, folklores, and collective memories that shape the Lepcha understanding of ecology, environment, and community life. These narratives are crucial in constructing the concept of bioregionalism as an embedded cultural and ecological framework. Participant observation included engagement in rituals, daily practices, meetings, and protest activities, providing insights into the community's socio-cultural organization and resistance practices. Unstructured interview enabled the researcher to capture diverse perspectives on locality and their perspectives on development.

The study particularly focuses on the Lepcha resistance movement against NHPC as a site where ecology, identity, and cultural politics intersect. This resistance is understood not merely as opposition, but as a culturally organized and historically

grounded assertion of indigenous ecological consciousness. Thematically, the research analyzes how ecological knowledge, place-based identity, and cultural rootedness contribute to sustaining a bioregional worldview. It highlights the interconnectedness of tribal culture, environmental ethics, and resistance, thereby situating Lepcha experiences within broader sociological debates on sustainability, indigenous knowledge systems, and risk society. Overall, the study contributes to both local and global discourses by demonstrating how indigenous ecological knowledge and cultural practices offer alternative models of development.

In this context, place-based identity, ecological sustainability, and cultural rootedness that define the shared ethos of subsistence are emphasized by bioregionalism as a framework. An immersive and interpretative investigation into community members lived experiences in relation to their ontological security with the connection of bioregional community life against the external definition of ecology, place, and development was made possible by the qualitative research design. The study sought to provide a detailed account (as thick description) of the place as Clifford Geertz interpreted it as a counter-definition to the statistical rationality of postcolonial developmental settings that reveal the social and symbolic meanings, spiritual connections, and emotional attachment with the environment and forest entities. This was in contrast to relying on statistical data or generalizing developmental interventions in tribal communities. In order to obtain an in-depth understanding of lived ecological consciousness, cultural observation was made in a culturally significant manner regarding local clothing patterns, symbols, rituals, religious acts pertaining to nature, and local community techniques of resistance against NHPC.

The major thematic areas of which the information gathered from the key respondents of different categories of Lepcha tribe of Dzongu living in Sikkim are:

- Ecological values and rituals
- Resistance strategies and community mobilization
- Personal experiences of environmental change

- Intergenerational knowledge transmission
- Perception of “development” and the NHPC project

The 60 respondents for the study were selected not as a “data point” but as a knowledge-holder, story-teller, or active agent in the cultural and ecological narrative of Dzongu. The age range of respondents spanned from young Lepcha activists (18–30 years), then middle aged (31–50 years) to community elders (above 60 years). There are 26 respondents are from 18–30 age group including male and female, 25 respondents from middle age and 09 respondents were above the 60 years including male and female. These age groups of the respondents were basically related with following understanding of the study.

- Younger respondents, (18 male and 8 female) especially members of the activist group Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT), were instrumental in articulating contemporary forms of ecological resistance using legal, digital, and media tools.
- Middle-aged respondents (30–50 years) (20 male and 5 female) provided insights into the lived experiences of balancing economic livelihood, spiritual obligations, and environmental stewardship.
- Elders, (6 male and 3 female) often oral historians and custodians of ritual knowledge, served as invaluable sources of indigenous ecological wisdom and sacred cosmologies, transmitted across generations.

The study consciously included the perspectives of Lepcha women, whose ecological roles are often overlooked in mainstream environmental discourse. The Interviews and informal discussion with focused group interaction with women revealed how ecology is gendered, and how cultural memory and environmental care are often embodied in feminine roles, such as caretakers, seed-savers, and story-keepers.

### **The Lepcha ecological world view**

Lepcha, Bhutia, and Nepali are the three mainstream ethnic communities living a small state in Sikkim. Lepcha tribe is the indigenous and primitive people of Sikkim

and they have a deep traditional knowledge of their nature or ecology. Lepchas were known as the first 'people of Sikkim', their constitutional status is that of a Scheduled Tribe, and in Sikkim, the State Government has given them the status of the "Most Primitive Tribe". The Lepchas are legally recognized as Indigenous in India through the Government's listing of their people as a 'Scheduled Tribe. They were recently recognized as having 'primitive tribe' status. Dzongu was declared a Lepcha reserve in 1957 by the last Chogyal of Sikkim in recognition that it is the Lepcha's sacred land and should be preserved for Lepchas. (Little 2008:2). Though numerically small, representing less than 7% of the total population in the region, they are historically, culturally and linguistically a very important community. The Bhutias invaded Sikkim in the 15th Century. Originally from Tibet these people settled in northern part of Sikkim and are known as the Lacheepas and Lachungpas in the North Sikkim. These people constitute about 10 % of the total population of Sikkim.

The Lepcha have an abundance of stories and narratives about their daily activities that have a connection to the rivers, mountains, forests, groves, and sacred surroundings. They used to reside in traditional Lepcha dwellings, which are constructed of bamboo with different structures (made up by various mythical beliefs relating to ecology) and are raised around five feet above the ground on stilts. They are also exceptionally skilled archers. The Lepcha's worldview of daily living, maintaining their means of subsistence, and, more broadly, their social structure is greatly influenced by these mythologies. According to the Government of India census of 2011, the total population of Lepchas in India was 80,316, another 3,445 live in Nepal, and constitute up to 15% of the indigenous tribal population in Bhutan, residing primarily in Sikkim. ItbuDebu Rum's Lepcha creation tale is told by elders of this community. The narrative describes how the first Lepcha pair, Fudongthing and NazongNyu, was created by Kongchen Konglo's (Khangchendzonga's Lepcha name) new snows. They call themselves as Mutanchi Rongkup RumKup, which translates to "Mother's Loved Ones, Children of the Snowy Peaks, Children of God." (Tribal.gov.in, Annual report, 2024). The deeply

embedded ecological indigenous and traditional knowledge system of the Lepchas (Rong) of Dzongu is typified by relational ontology and animistic in nature. Folklore and knowledge of medicinal and other plants and herbs, shows Lepcha's deep connection with their nature. Rivers like the Teesta, which are closely linked to cultural identity, mythology, and livelihood practices, are living examples of spiritual action rather than resources. Along with that their indigenous knowledge systems recognized in ethno-biology for example, documented uses of 118 plant species by Lepchas in ethno-medicinal practices and local medicine practitioner are totally dependent on these medicinal plants which are also very distinct in nature. The field for the research was Dzongu situated in the northern part of Sikkim, a designated Lepcha reserve area of Sikkim. Dzongu holds immense ecological, spiritual, and cultural significance for the Lepcha people. Surrounded by the Teesta River and Kanchenjunga National Park, it is often described by the Lepchas as a "Mayal Lyang" (Hidden Paradise) a sacred land bestowed by their ancestors. Dzongu is also the epicenter of the Lepcha resistance against hydroelectric dam construction, especially the proposed Stage IV Teesta dam by NHPC, which threatened sacred rivers like Rongyoung Chu and deeply revered landscapes. Hence, Dzongu provides a rich site for investigating bioregionalism through the lens of ecological knowledge, activism, and indigenous identity. The term "Dzongu" originates from the Bhutia language, translating to "a place with nine districts," which underscores its cultural significance and historical context (Gowloog, 1995). Geographically, Dzongu Valley has a triangular shape, covering an area of about 78 square kilometers. The altitudinal variation within the valley ranges from 700 meters at its lowest points to 6,000 meters at its highest peaks (Pradhan and Badola, 2008). Oral narratives and shared environmental memories are the main means by which bioregional attachments are maintained, according to an empirical qualitative study on the ecology, society, and culture of the Lepcha people residing in Dzongu. Elders tell tales of ancestral narratives, origin stories of Lepcha tribe and mountain Kanchanjungha, woodland experiences, and river deities like Teesta and Rangeet that influence environmental decision-making and

community ethics. The stories related to ecology are continuous from one generation to another through songs, festivals, rituals, and everyday practices, all these shows landscape's collective memory. Despite the increasing effects of modernization, displacement, and outside development initiatives, younger Lepcha people view these tales and collective memories as the community's cultural "stock of knowledge" (Schutz, 1967) and as cultural anchors that place them within a larger ecological framework.

Therefore, the bioregional narratives that support the ecological self of the Lepcha community gave rise to the environmental movement of the Lepcha tribe in North Sikkim, Dzongu. A common moral position that puts cultural and ecological integrity ahead of material progress is expressed via songs, prayers, protest rituals, and oral testimony. Thus, bioregional awareness actively influences political and ecological activity in addition to preserving memory.

While healers, farmers, bonthings (traditional medicinal practitioners), and women integrate ecological knowledge into ritual healing, agricultural practices, and the preservation of sacred forests, young activists reinterpret ancestral myths to address environmental problems. These changes highlight how different Indigenous narratives are dynamic, adapting and resisting new challenges while preserving their ecological ties to their ancestral lands. An elder from the Dzongu says that,

Lepcha's each and every ritual is related to nature only. From building their houses to agriculture, to health, marriage, festivals to death rites, all are fond of doing rituals related to Mother Nature. It is universally accepted that they have never migrated beyond Kanchenjunga's shadow. It appears that the community made a conscious effort to always keep Kanchenjunga in sight. It is rare to find any Lepcha village from where Kanchenjunga cannot be sighted. According to them, a Lepcha greeting 'Achuley' refers to the salutation to the mountain. Within the Lepcha villages, the traditional practitioners/healers like-the bongthing, mun and the monks, conserve and preserve endangered species of plants in their domicile gardens for ritual purposes.

Even the concept of health and illness among the Lepchas people are fully guided

and cared by the supernatural. Lepcha people have their tradition and costume and their own rituals. Various rituals are performed by *Bongthing* (male Lepcha priest) and *Muns* (female Lepcha priest). *Bongthings* and *Muns* are god gifted or are inherited from their father and forefather. Lepcha people they belief that if they get sick then they can be cure by the supernatural things like offering various kind of rituals to god and goddesses of their community. Their offerings are totally dependent and devoted to the nature. These symbolic meaning to the natural objects regulates the everyday economic action of the Lepcha community. Taking Goffman's (1959) understanding of social self, it is theoretically right to say that Lepcha everyday life is a performance, where actors use symbols, gestures and rituals to maintain social order and express their cultural identity. For them their relationship with nature, rituals and subsistence can be understood as continuous dramaturgy and that performance takes place on ecological landscape of Dzongu. In this stage, for Lepcha their landscape is like a front stage, as Dzongu itself is an ecological theatre on which cultural identity is performed and backstage is where negotiation, meaningful preparation and practice take place. It is like every day spaces of meaning of ecological ethics, symbols (that taught) and preparation.

### **NHPC and the Developmental Epistemology**

The story of Lepcha movement against the NHPC project in Dzongu rooted with the modern-universal-homogenization development discourse and the local epistemologies of progress and happiness. It explores the narrative of how Lepcha culture is threatened by modernization and massive hydropower projects, and how young Lepchas are dealing with the loss of their tradition. This is an excellent illustration of how local beliefs have fostered a particular local brand of environmentalism in Dzongu, North Sikkim. The NHPC Hydro Power project, which involves the construction of a dam over the Lepcha sacred river Teesta, is the subject of this development. Now in the name of the development, it becomes more commercialized and marketed by using complex scientific equipment's and instrument. The Lepcha understands of NHPC on river Teesta is a crisis of Lepcha's 'public sphere' by the domination of 'system world' over 'lifeworld' (Habarmass



1987, 1989). The traditional 'public sphere' of Lepcha in Dzongu has a bioregional ethics of 'communicative rationality' that shapes their local 'ethos' of community inter-subjectivity through collective memory and spiritual understanding of ecology and environment. The protests to save environment are not merely on grounds of displacement but that the regions, place, their cultural and ethnic traditions are rooted in the river Teesta and its ecological environment. From the Lepchas narrative of what they describe as 'a violation of a sacred Landscape'.

The NHPC commissioned two projects in 2011 that are already producing electricity: the 60 MW Rangeet-III HEP and the 510 MW Teesta Stage-V HEP. Teesta Stage IV, the most controversial hydel, which is in the process in the Dzongu Lepcha Reserve. It includes six projects (including one that is almost finished on the Dzongu border at Dikchu). Large-scale infrastructure projects, industrial expansion, and modernization have frequently been the subject of developmental discussions. These concepts frequently disregard local customs and indigenous cultures, viewing them as less significant in the quest for advancement. This tension is seen among the Lepcha community in Dzongu, North Sikkim. NHPC initiated hydropower projects, which they have strongly criticized. On the other hand, the Lepcha people believe that these projects put serious threats to their cultural legacy, which they have protected for many centuries. Their spiritual traditions are disturbed by the building of dams and associated infrastructure, which also jeopardizes the natural balance that supports their way of life (Lepcha, 2021, 2022; Tamang, 2022).

The present scenario exemplifies a larger struggle between two ideologies: localization, which places more emphasis on community control, cultural preservation, and environmental stewardship, and modernization, which stresses government-led development and technological solutions. The Lepchas continued opposition to NHPC's initiatives poses significant queries regarding modern development strategies. Who really benefits from these projects? Whose needs come first? What parts of local culture, tradition, and the environment are lost for the sake of progress? By closely examining how the Lepchas interact with these

industrial projects, we can gain valuable insights into how marginalized communities respond to, resist, and reevaluate development. The Lepchas counter narratives illustrate the importance of valuing local identity and protecting the environment, rather than simply following outside notions of progress.

This example highlights the need for a more fair and inclusive approach to development that respects diverse cultures. In opposition of NHPC, Chewang Lepcha (age-54) a key informer of the study, who is a farmer said:

Nature has supported all the times during calamities. We worship nature viz. stones, mountains, hills, and rivers. The Kangchendzonga and rivers are paramount reality for Lepcha. Likewise, it is significant in Bree (marriage) that while holding the promise (Sungkyu) the couple worship and sip water to piouness their love for endless journey. The couple make promise as 'Kanchendonga nadaleejain, Teesta Rangeet nasukkeesamma' (until the fall of Kanchendzonga or rivers Teesta and Rangeet will shrink, their marriage intact forever). This belief remains intact throughout their life.

According Tempa Lepcha, 68 years old retired Lepcha teacher of Hee-gyathang,

There are perimeters of Dzongu such as in the north direction is - the peak or mountain named Phophundoad signifying as it is shaped like a fishtail. In the south direction, there is a river called Ungrungphap. Between Ungrungphap and Phophundoad, there are the people of Dzongu."Our ancestors were giving must respects to environment. But now, gradually those values are vanishing and people are getting materialistic day by day.

There are some counter narratives also found among the young and middle age generation Lepcha people about their everyday life. According to Dawa Tshering Lepcha, 52 years old male Lepcha,

I feel differently from the others who think that the past Lepcha life was better. In the past, there were no roads to reach one village to another village. People were reaching from one village to another by climbing the hilly road that was taking so much time. There were no education and no connection with the outside world and were no health facilities. But now, we have well-connected roads, every Panchayat has schools and hospitals for primary check-up and now people are not living

hunger due to the government facility of PDS and MNRGES. Now, the young generation Lepcha is going outside and they are doing well in education and also in competitive market opportunities.



Source: Field work

### The Conflict: Dzongu and the Politics of Knowledge

The concept of the politics of knowledge refers to how certain ways of understanding the world are privileged (e.g., technical, state-endorsed scientific knowledge against the space and place) while other form of knowledge are being understood especially Indigenous and place-based (can be understood through the concept 'bioregionalism') epistemologies are marginalized or dismissed. This idea is central to interpreting the conflict in Dzongu, between scientific led knowledge and local based indigenous knowledge. In Dzongu, the Lepcha community's knowledge systems are deeply tied to cosmology, ecology, and land stewardship, and this produces a distinct epistemological conflict with state based one-dimensional approach for development of NHPC. The debate around environmental impact of hydropower projects in Sikkim also contains a religious dimension. The Lepcha's, now settled mainly in the protected area of Dzongu, traditionally regarding nature, mountains and rivers as integrally connected to themselves. There is a deep-ecological connection between Lepcha and their ecology as being part of one guardian under Kanchanjungha Mountain. Their spiritual history

remains at the core of their traditional value system and that has become part of their anti-dam movement under the banner of Affected Citizens of the Teesta (ACT) (Little, 2009). The Bhutia communities, which predominantly reside in the West Sikkim, have equally been involved and actively participated in anti-dam protest. Especially the proposition of projects on the sacred, Rathong Chu River in the Western part of Sikkim, has provoked protest on religious ground by several groups among which Sikkim Bhutia Lepcha Apex Committee (SIBLAC). Protest such as these have eventually even led to several projects on this river to be scrapped. According to Lepcha cosmology, the first Lepcha man (Fudongthing) and woman (Nazong Nyu) was created in Dzongu by the heavenly ancestor Itbu Rum. According to oral tradition (by elders), Dzongu is one of the "hidden lands" (beyuls) blessed by Guru Padmasambhava, where humans, nature, and spirits coexist. Dzongu is considered a geographical manifestation of myth, a living, sacred geography, the abode of ancestral spirits, and a paradise for ritual, healing, and community well-being. The land itself becomes a sacred setting that narrates the ancestry of Lepcha people's history. Their Mother God, Teesta (Rongnyu), is implanted in them, and Rongyong Chu is connected to ancestral fecundity. Numerous ceremonies, healings, and purifications take place here. Regarding Dzongu's as a sacred landscape, position as previously mentioned, the state's administration has approved a plan to bar NHPC from the region around Dzongu and the Teesta River. The Dzongu and Tholung valleys are regarded by the Lepcha as a holy place and landscape since they are connected to the legendary origins of the Lepcha people (Tamlong, 2015). The second was the NHPC Teesta stage (IV AND V). The region's elders (during the field work) spoke out against the destruction of sacred places, especially those associated with the Ancestral God Kanchenjunga, sacred lakes, Kathok, Tso Lhamo, the rivers Teesta and Rongyong, and ghosts and evil protectors associated with forests (Laso mung, Tungkyong). According to the elders, this wasn't the destruction of only object like a place but it was the bio-cultural devastation or we can say ethnological destruction.

The story of Lepcha movement against the NHPC project in Dzongu rooted with the modern-universal-homogenization development discourse that promote uniformity and the local knowledge system or the epistemologies of narratives towards their ecology and their indigenous practices. By 20 August 2007, an indefinite hunger strike was ongoing at B.L House in Gangtok. Political leaders from both within and outside Sikkim voiced their support for Lepcha community (Tamlong, 2015). In 2007, ACT was led by Dawa Lepcha and Tenzing Lepcha who fought to protect ecological integrity and maintain regional environmental balance (that is symbolically meaningful). Local People of Dzongu resisted the project in various ways that including using banner with slogans and that reflected their ancestral stories of origin of the place and tribe, narratives of their existence, mythologies related to their rituals, Gods, forest and evil spirits and songs. These forms of expressions emphasized the strong connection between their indigenous identity, ecological values and sustainable way of life. The Lepcha community's opposition to hydro power project is not merely political but it also represents a cultural assertion of their worldview where land, rivers, spirits and people are interconnected within one moral and ecological system. Their traditional knowledge system show that nature is deeply embedded in their social life, memory and spirituality rather than being viewed only as a resource. Contemporary global development discourse increasingly reveals a fundamental tension between the demands of economic growth and the ecological limits of the planet. Since the post- world- war II period, dominant development paradigms largely shaped by modernization theory that mostly emphasized industrialization, infrastructural expansion, and market integration as primary pathways to progress. These approaches often reflect "trickle down" logic, assuming that technological and material advancement will automatically improve conditions at the grassroots level. However, from sociological perspectives, particularly drawing on critical development theory and political ecology, such growth-oriented models have produced uneven outcomes. Environmental crisis in the late-twentieth and early twenty first centuries, such as climate change, biodiversity

loss, deforestation and displacement highlight the contradiction of this model. Thinkers like Arturo Escobar and Wolfgang Sachs critique this dominant paradigm by arguing that development is not a neutral or universal process but a discourse shaped by power, knowledge and global hierarchies. In this sense, development can function as a form of cultural and economic hegemony, often undermining local knowledge systems and alternative ways of living. Therefore, it becomes essential to conceptualize development through the lens of sustainability and ecological justice. This involves recognizing pluralistic epistemologies, valuing indigenous knowledge and promoting models of development that are environmentally sustainable, socially equitable and culturally sensitive. Finally, the call to rethink development through sustainability connects with sustainable development theory and concepts like ecological modernization, which attempt to reconcile economic growth with environmental protection (Naess, 1989; Guha, 1998). Ecology, in this sense, goes beyond the mere conservation of resources; it interrogates the very foundations of how societies define and pursue well-being. The ecological perspective emphasizes that development should be understood holistically, where economic, social and environmental dimensions are deeply interconnected. In the late 1980s, discussions around sustainability and localized development gained momentum as efforts increased to align development practices with ecological responsibility. The Brundtland Report (1987) introduced the idea of “sustainable development” defining it as the fulfilment of present needs without undermining the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. This concept rapidly gained acceptance among policymakers and international organizations, contributing to the widespread adoption of sustainability frameworks.

In this context, now we have to see how state, capital and modernization discourse intersect in Dzongu and how Lepcha tribe see them as external existential threats to their land, livelihood and cultural identity. Here state sponsored modernization project frames the NHPC projects as necessary steps towards local development and economic growth of Sikkim. The logic of scientific and infrastructural progress

of the Sikkim's people through NHPC by the state legitimizes as a rational planner of development. From a sociological standpoint, the state sought to implement a unilinear development model that Dzongu must develop through the universal notion of progress, which in some way imposes a cultural hierarchy that prioritizes techno-economic rationality over indigenous worldviews and their phenomenology of lifeworld. Similarly, this can be understood in the context of Foucault's "Power/knowledge and bio-politics," in which he argues that the state, NHPC, engineers, and NGOs produce knowledge about environmental impact assessment, and this knowledge legitimizes control over both the Lepcha population and their natural world (the River Teesta). In this case, the Lepcha become the focus of governmentality, which ought to be advanced in order of sustainable growth. This is known as "bio-political domination," in which authority is dominated via controlling the environment, their life world, and their geographical territory. The tribal community becomes a target of opposition and object of growth as well. Taking this into account, the main goals of this research paper are to conceptualize these kinds of emergent social movements based on how indigenous knowledge, institutional practices, and the preservation of ecologically particular livelihoods build local identities. The contemporary reaction by the Lepchas in Dzongu towards the mainstream development paradigm of modernization process sponsored by the state creates an academic discussion on the question of tribal rights in the name of progress and development. The major objectives of this study were to develop theoretical perspectives on how nature becomes a social construction of reality through explaining that how an individual and this ethnic group are attached with a symbolic and cultural meaning towards natural objects. The symbolic interactionist like Mead and Blumer's perspective in social psychology sees first, the unique feature of the human mind is its capacity to use symbols to designate objects in the environment. For Mead (1932) mind is a process. Mead termed this process of using symbols or language covertly 'imaginative rehearsal'<sup>1</sup>. In accordance with principles of behaviourism, Darwinism and Pragmatism, Mead stressed that mind arises out of in the process of individual or infant and how with

the trial-and-error method they came with some appropriate symbols, gestures and shared language which give common meaning to the individual and its environment. With this development, gestures now denote the same objects and carry the same meaning for interaction and mead calls this process as 'conventional gestures'<sup>2</sup>.

The understanding of Lepcha connection of nature or ecology in sociological way has also emphasized from the very beginning of when Durkheim (1912) developed the concept of 'totemism'. As we know 'totemism' is a system of religious belief which attributes divine properties to a particular type of animal or plants. It gives cultural meaning to certain physical objects. This region is an example of case study because basically this particular geographical territory has some unique features of belief system and practices. Lepcha people have given certain meaning to the physical object or to the nature and we called it as 'social construction of reality'. Here the question is, which type of rights, the Lepcha people are demanding for- is the structural development right, which is dominated or sponsored by state and the external forces of globalization or either their rights of their own home land? This paper is trying to explore the dynamic understanding of man-environment relationship in the context of local beliefs, culture, and religion in terms of critical understanding of contemporary conflicts and resistance toward the post-colonial development through the lens of farmers, government school teachers, elders, old people, women and youth of the community.

The case study of Lepcha community living in Dzongu is trying to explain the social construction of ethnic identity of Lepcha community with their socio-cultural linkages to the ecology and environment. The symbolic meaning to the nature through religious beliefs and rituals by the Lepcha community in Dzongu produces a sense of "subsistence ethics" that shapes their social action in everyday life. This ethnic/tribal identity based on the beliefs of 'naturism' has turned into collective consciousness in the form social movement when the NHPC Hydropower Project introduced over the Teesta and Rangeet River under the banner of



development of Lepcha life. Here For them, the bioregional consciousness becomes a form of resistance that is simultaneously cultural (preserving identity), ecological (protecting ecology and bio diversity) and political (rejecting domination discourse of so called development). The movement has been conceptualized by the community as destruction of their nature, livelihood and sustainability. Their harmonious and spiritual relationship with river Teesta and Rangeet through religious symbol have been destroyed in the name of “development” project backed by scientific rationality of the Postcolonial state. This movement is unique and has a basic difference from the other social movements in the sense of method that they adopted for their movement largely derived the mythology of Lepcha community. In this context of development, According to Tenzing Gyatso Lepcha, age 42 from Dzongu, who is a young farmer and an activist:

Development denotes sustainability and always works gradually in the process of development. There are alternative ways of development rather to build the dams. Actual development represents progress in the health sector, education, maintenance of roads, conserving and preserving nature and promotes eco-tourism. For instance, building a luxurious hotel in the village doesn't means the overall development of the village of village population, rather, the development and initiation of home stay with a community centric approach which is our traditional way to treat guest is a most suitable tourism policies for the development of our village commons. The local homestay will promote ecotourism, conservation of environment and community-based tourism. According to me equal opportunities in development and eco-centric sustainable development is the actual meaning of development and progress.

Sherap Lepcha, a 65 years old Lepcha farmer and a Mun Bongthing (female healer) narrated:

For me development is unthinkable without the agriculture that gives the life tour villagers. Progress means Kheti pati lagawnu, Anna bali lagawnu, and saak sabji lagawnu (sowing the crops, millets, seeds, and vegetables that are considered as progress). Over the last decade, we farmers revived the cultivation of traditional millets like finger millet and foxtail millets that were declining due to hybrid rice promoted by government. Our development can't be defined by the people who are not seen our culture, our environment and our tradition. Development must be aligned with our own ecological worldview and with our own notion progress. Any developmental intervention in the name of infrastructural development in Dzongu

should be appropriate according to the Dzongu's ecological and environmental context. In this sense, living in Dzongu with the idea of development must be rooted with its traditional agricultural practices because farming can only lead to the protection of our sacred land and our ecological sovereignty.

According to Chewang Lepcha, a 55 years farmer from Dzongu stated:

Dams and industries in Dzongu will not achieve development and progress for Dzongu people; these are only for the benefit for the people living in town and other people who are the outsiders of Dzongu. As a result, the Dzongu people will only face the natural calamity by disturbing the natural ecosystem of Dzongu. Roads and bridge initiatives in our locality are sufficient but dams and industries will not benefit for our people. Dams can provide progress for a short time but we will face long-term or long-run impacts on the environment as well as on Lepcha people. In the name of development, the Lepchas of Dzongu will be the only sufferer.

Along with the above narratives, the common understanding of development by the Lepcha people across the generation is “there should be complete banned of mega NHPC projects in Sikkim in general and Dzongu in particular because it is a sinking area and is a holy place of Lepcha people. Development that is initiated by the Sikkim government needs verification and survey to know about the region's ecological and environmental specificities. Different location or places have different geographical nature and natural settings and the government should be noted this while planning for infrastructural development. The development model that the government is introducing makes local people isolated and deprive without taking into account of their understanding of ecology and environment in their life.

This study tried to theorize the problem of development discourse in the Lepcha cognitive world view, their narrative analysis towards the nature and human interaction and the Teesta and Rangeet in the collective memory of Lepcha society. This can be related with the sociological understanding of ‘phenomenology of lifeworld (Schutz, 1967) with the community identity through Lepcha's ‘cultural stock of knowledge’ as ‘ecological self’. The human conduct is always established in a particular place that shapes the community's geographical landscape. The interaction between man and environment and the associated practices forms the basis of social organization of space and place. Such practices range from human

beings very struggle for livelihood to its involvement in cultural practices. These interactional competencies and embodied practices finds expression in the form of what is in common parlance is understood as 'surrounding', 'environment', 'landscape', 'territory' etc. and these comes under the community's symbolic representations, their livelihood and the life world goes on. These are the things which are means to them as the essence of their life. The landscape and the territory provide a social relationship between human and nature which help to develop the sense of "belongingness" towards the landscape.

## Conclusion

The Dzongu region of North Sikkim officially designated as a protected space for indigenous community of Lepcha provides a critical empirical context for examining the above mentioned dynamics. For Lepcha, the natural environment constitutes a sacred and living entity deeply embedded in their cosmology, cultural practices and collective identity (Arora, 2006). The tension surrounding hydropower project in Dzongu can be understood as an epistemological conflict between competing knowledge systems that is modern scientific knowledge and indigenous ecological knowledge. This divergence reflects deeper epistemic hierarchies that privilege certain forms of knowledge over others. Drawing upon Michel Foucault's concept of power/knowledge, it can be argued that development discourse functions as a regime of truth that legitimizes specific forms of knowledge while marginalizing others<sup>3</sup>. In this sense, hydropower projects are not merely technical interventions but are embedded within discursive formations that define what constitutes "valid" knowledge and "rational development." Likewise post-colonial perspective also illustrates these dynamics by foregrounding the question of voice and representation. Gayatri Spivak's seminal question, "can the subaltern speak"?<sup>4</sup> is particularly relevant in this context, as it draws attention to the systematic silencing of marginalized communities within dominant discourses

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of development. The Lepcha community also faces this kind of structural marginalization. In addition, Karl Marx's critique of capitalism provides a lens to interpret hydro power development as a process of commodification, wherein natural entities such as rivers are transformed into units of economic values (Marx, 1867, 1976). Max Weber's concept of rationalization further explains how bureaucratic and technical logics come to dominate decision making processes often doesn't considered ethical and cultural considerations (Weber, 1922, 1978). David Harvey's notion of "accumulation by dispossession" deepens this analysis by highlighting how development projects entail the appropriation of land and resources, frequently leading to the displacement and disenfranchisement" of indigenous populations (Harvey, 2003). Such process are often justifies in the name of the "greater common good", yet they produce uneven outcomes that disproportionately burden marginalized communities. This paper basically, argues the conflict over hydropower development in Dzongu within a broader theoretical framework that integrates political ecology, post-colonial theories and classical sociological perspectives. It examined how competing knowledge systems interact, conflict and negotiates within the context of state-led development initiatives. In doing so, the study contributes to critical debates on development, environment and indigenous rights and also need diverse epistemologies in policy making processes. This paper calls for a more reflexive and dialogical approach that acknowledges the legitimacy of indigenous knowledge systems and fosters more equitable and sustainable futures.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The human mind is according to Mead characterized by some unique features: the human mind is capable of using symbols to denote objects, to rehearse different types of action, and to imaginarily select the most appropriate line of action (the latter two are made possible by virtue of the symbols). This mindful use of symbols is called imaginative rehearsal, and this process is a necessary condition for the development of self and society. Because of the

mind's capacity to use significant symbols, as a basis for true communication, humans can transcend the simple pattern of action based on gestures. Gestures are used in any act involving two or more people (or animals), but only through the human mind can they acquire meanings which become common or shared among individuals in the course of their interactions with others. These are significant symbols, and they make up the essence of human communication through language.

<sup>2</sup> With this development, gestures now denote the same objects and carry the same meaning for interaction and mead calls this process as '*conventional gestures*'. Human behaviours, interaction and social organization are possible by the virtue of unique human abilities, beginning with the capacity to use and read conventional and or significant gestures that mean the same thing to the sending and receiving the organism.

<sup>3</sup> Foucault's concept of power/knowledge emphasizes that knowledge is not neutral but produced within power relations that determine what is considered truth. (Foucault, 1980).

<sup>4</sup> Spivak's critique highlights the structural conditions that prevent marginalized groups from being heard within dominant discourses, even when they attempt to resist (Spivak, 1988).

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## Understanding the Violent Conflict in Manipur: The Roots and Repercussions <sup>1</sup>

Shivam Sintury <sup>2</sup>

This article examines the ethnic conflict that erupted in Manipur in May 2023 and continued to destabilise the state through 2026. Using a qualitative documentary case-study approach, the paper draws on secondary sources, official statements, court and government documents, human rights reports, and recent journalistic accounts to trace the conflict's origins, dynamics, and consequences. The analysis shows that the violence cannot be reduced to a single trigger. Rather, it emerged from the interaction of land grievances, uneven development, identity politics, migration anxieties, weak institutions, and competing claims over political representation. The paper also demonstrates that the conflict has produced large-scale displacement, destruction of property, severe psychological trauma, and economic contraction. Finally, it argues that militarised containment alone cannot generate durable peace. A sustainable settlement requires inclusive dialogue, equitable development, accountability, disarmament, rehabilitation, and trust-building across communities.

**Keywords:** conflict, communal tensions, ethnic violence, identity politics, Kuki-Meitei conflict, Manipur.

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This study adopts a qualitative case-study approach to examine the violent conflict in Manipur that began in May 2023. The case study method is employed because it allows an in-depth examination of the historical, political, social, and economic dimensions of a contemporary conflict within its specific regional context. It is based on a structured reading of secondary sources, including academic literature, peer-reviewed articles, policy reports, court-related reporting, human-rights documentation, selected media accounts, and publications of civil society organizations. Sources were selected for relevance to three analytical questions: the fundamental causes of the conflict, the forms of violence and harm produced, and the responses of the state and civil society. Priority was given to peer-reviewed academic publications, official government documents, reports from international organizations, and established news agencies. Media reports were used primarily to document specific incidents and recent developments where academic literature was not yet available.

The study relies primarily on secondary sources and therefore faces several limitations. First, the absence of primary fieldwork restricts direct verification of events and perceptions among affected communities. Second, casualty figures, displacement estimates, and accounts of violence may vary across sources due to the dynamic nature of the conflict. Third, media reports often reflect particular institutional or ideological perspectives. Thus, findings are interpreted as an analytical synthesis of available evidence rather than as definitive conclusions regarding all aspects of the conflict.

Nevertheless, given the highly polarized nature of the conflict, the study adopted a triangulation strategy. Claims and events were cross-checked across multiple categories of sources, including academic publications, government documents, human rights reports, and independent media accounts. The analysis focuses on identifying recurring patterns and areas of convergence across sources rather than privileging any single narrative. The study primarily focuses on the period from May 2023, when large-scale ethnic violence erupted in Manipur, to April 2026. However, to understand the structural roots of the conflict, historical developments relating to land ownership, ethnic relations, political representation, and state formation from the colonial and post-independence periods are also examined.

## Conceptual Framework

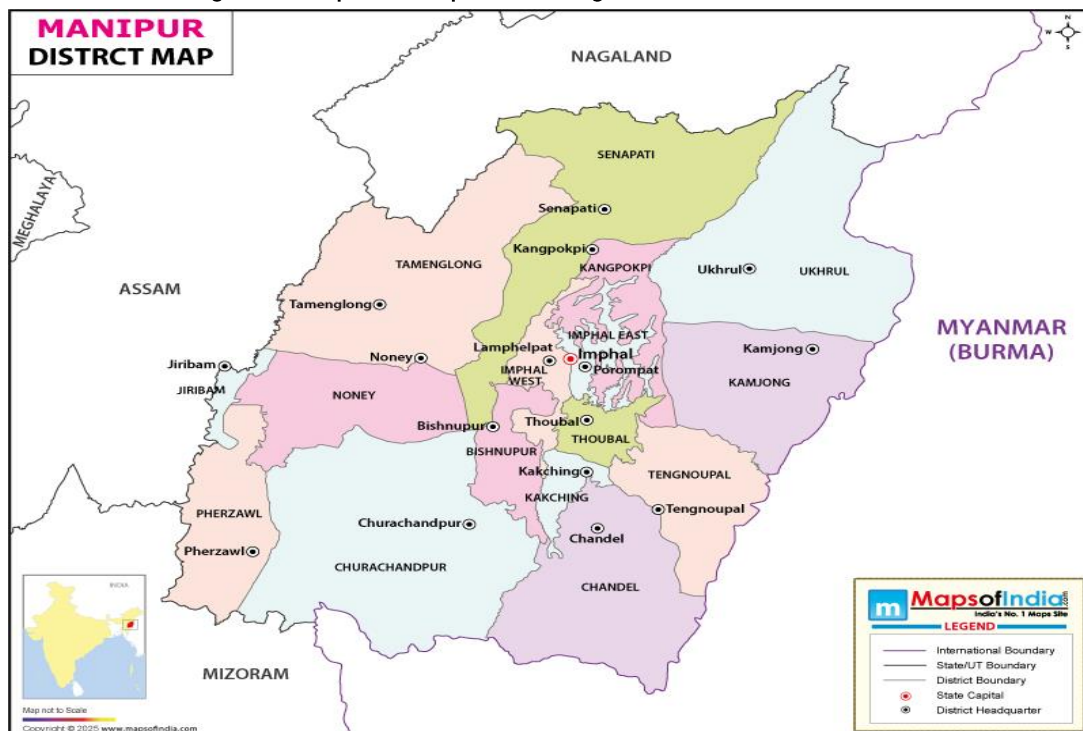
The paper uses political violence as the primary analytical lens rather than generalized violence alone. Violence here refers to intentional coercive action that produces physical, psychological, social, or material harm. The conflict is better understood as ethnic and political violence because the mobilization of groups is connected to access to territory, status, representation, and state power. This study employs Samuel P. Huntington's cultural fault-line thesis and Ted Robert Gurr's Relative Deprivation Theory as analytical frameworks. Huntington's perspective helps explain how cultural, ethnic, religious, and linguistic differences between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities have reinforced group boundaries and intensified identity-based mobilization. Gurr's Relative Deprivation Theory is used to understand how perceived inequalities in development, political representation, resource allocation, and access to opportunities generated collective grievances among tribal communities, thereby increasing the likelihood of political mobilization and violent conflict. These perspectives are not treated as universal explanations; instead, they provide a framework for understanding why long-standing structural inequalities became politically explosive in Manipur (Mahakul, 2014).

## Contextualizing Manipur

An examination of historical demographic boundaries reveals that prior to British colonization, Manipur was ruled by a hereditary *Maharaja* exercising autonomous authority over the valley region, which was inhabited by the Meitei community (Kipgen, 2025, p. 04). In contrast, the hill areas were inhabited largely by Naga and Kuki-Zo communities with different political traditions and patterns of settlement. Among the Naga tribes, "political organization was based on village autonomy and practiced direct democracy. Whereas, the Kuki political system was more centralised and led by a hereditary caste of chiefs. Over time, villages developed larger associations of communities and a confederation of villages. However, the emergence of the modern state antagonised these indigenous institutions of self-governance (Leth, 2023; Kalita, 2011). In the post-Independence period, Indian policymakers wanted to integrate the North-East region with the rest of the country. On 21 September 1949, an agreement of merger was signed between the *Maharaja* Budhachandra Singh of Manipur and the

Government of India. The state of Manipur was formally inaugurated as a federal state of India on 15 October 1949 (Singh, 2011, p. 146). Furthermore, it became a Union Territory in 1956. In 1963, Manipur was provided a legislative assembly, with a council of ministers headed by a chief minister. Finally, it became the 20<sup>th</sup> full-fledged state of India on 21 January 1972 by the North-Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act, 1971 (Sinha, 1987).

Figure 1: Map of Manipur showing all the district of the state



Source: Maps of India.com

Today, the state is geographically split between the Imphal Valley, inhabited mostly by the Meitei community and the surrounding hill districts are home to the Naga and Kuki-Zo communities, a division that remains central to its political economy (Singha and Singh, 2016). Manipur's population was recorded as 2,721,756, with Meitei constituting approx. 59 per cent of the population, followed by various tribes (Naga and Kuki-Zo) with around 41 per cent. The Meiteis are either unreserved or Other Backward Class (OBC) categories Hindus, whereas the Kuki-Zo and Nagas are Scheduled Tribes (ST) and mostly Christians (MyGov, 2023; Wikipedia, 2026). This spatial distribution is important because conflict in Manipur is not only ethnic;

it is also territorial, administrative, and developmental. Huntington's cultural fault-line perspective is also useful in understanding these developments. The conflict rooted in competing ethnic identities, historical narratives, religious affiliations, and territorial claims. The Meitei community, predominantly Hindu and concentrated in the valley, and the largely Christian Kuki-Zo tribes inhabiting the hills increasingly viewed one another through distinct cultural and political lenses. Consistent with Huntington's argument, these cultural fault-lines became powerful markers of political mobilisation and collective insecurity.

### **Deep-Seated Grievances and Disagreements**

#### **Territorial Control and Unresolved Grievances over Land & Resources**

The Meitei, who are concentrated in the valley, have long regarded the territorial integrity of Manipur as inseparable from the unity of the state. Many hill communities, by contrast, have viewed the valley-centric state structure as a source of exclusion. In 1971, the 27th Amendment to the Indian Constitution gave Manipur a special status to protect the hill tribes but their implementation was widely perceived as weak (Mawon, 2022). Conversely, in the recent past, from 2020 to 2023, the state's recent programs to safeguard the environment by getting rid of people from forests, and crack down on opium poppy farming (for the Kuki-Zo in the hill districts, poppy farming was a major way to make a living) (Financial Express, 2023; Al Jazeera, 2024). From the perspective of Relative Deprivation Theory, these policies deepened feelings of marginalisation among the Kuki-Zo tribes. The disruption of traditional livelihoods, especially through anti-poppy cultivation drives and forest eviction measures, heightened perceptions that state policies disproportionately burdened hill communities while favouring valley interests. The resulting sense of deprivation increased distrust toward state institutions and contributed to conflict escalation.

## **Ethnicity, Migration, Identity Politics, and State Complicity**

Another significant factor is the Myanmar civil war of 2021, between 5,000 and 10,000 Chin refugees of Myanmar has been forced to take shelter in Kuki-dominant areas in Manipur further complicated demographic and security narratives, allowing migration to be framed as a political threat (Duo, 2023; Bobichand, 2025). The issue was therefore not migration alone but the way migration was interpreted through already polarised identity categories. Furthermore, the Kuki-Zo and Nagas account for forty percent of the population of Manipur and hold over ninety percent of the land, whereas the Meiteis, with the majority of the population, are limited to ten percent of the land. Likewise, at present, the Meiteis hold 40 out of the 60 seats in the state assembly, whereas the tribals, who constitute forty percent of the population, merely occupy 19 seats (International Crisis Group, 2025). Over the years, infrastructure development in Manipur is largely confined to the Valley. The difference is very clear in the allocation of the budgets by the Manipur state government: the total budgetary allocation of the Imphal Valley stood at INR 21,481 crores against a very modest INR 419 crores of the hills in the period between 2017 and 2020 (International Crisis Group, 2025). This disparity can be interpreted through Ted Robert Gurr's Relative Deprivation Theory. Gurr argues that violent conflict often emerges when a group perceives a significant gap between its legitimate expectations and its actual socio-economic conditions. The stark imbalance in budgetary allocations between the valley and hill districts reinforced among the tribal communities a perception of systematic exclusion from development benefits. Such perceived deprivation generated frustration, resentment, and a sense of injustice, contributing to the deep-seated grievances that eventually facilitated ethnic mobilisation and violent confrontation.

## **Immediate Trigger for the Violence**

The immediate catalyst was the controversy surrounding Scheduled Tribe status for Meiteis. The application for the Meitei scheduled tribe status was brought forth in the year of 1982 and, a second time, in the year of 2001 but rejected on

constitutional grounds (Abhimanyu & Yogesh, 2025; Lakshman, 2023). However, on April 14, 2023, the Manipur High Court's order to consider the demand renewed tribal fears that affirmative protections for hill communities could be diluted (Ibid.; Baruah, 2023). The legal decision itself did not cause the violence on its own; rather, it activated pre-existing anxieties about land, status, and the balance of power. Since the Scheduled Tribe label has significant implications in the Indian Constitution, which grants beneficiaries special treatment in government jobs, schools, and other business organisations. The ATSU Manipur was deeply concerned that these new developments would further marginalize the historically disadvantaged tribal population, potentially stripping them of their existing legal protections and rights (Zainab, 2024). Huntington's framework suggests that when communities perceive their cultural identity and collective interests to be under threat, they are more likely to mobilise politically. The Meitei demand for Scheduled Tribe status was interpreted by many tribal groups not merely as an administrative issue but as a challenge to existing protections safeguarding tribal identity, land rights, and political autonomy. Consequently, on May 3, 2023, the All-Tribal Student Union Manipur (ATSUM) organised a tribal solidarity march in ten districts of Manipur against the order (Rihmo, 2025). The Indigenous Tribal Leaders' Forum (ITLF) and Joint Coordination Committee on Tribal Rights Manipur (JCCOTR-M) supported this initiative. After knowing that the Anglo-Kuki War centenary memorial had been burned, which is of historical importance to the tribal community, the two communities engaged in the conflict when the Meiteis faced off against an armed tribal group in the foothills of Churachandpur (Sharma and Mohanty, 2024, pp. 68-69). Once attacks spread from the hills to the valley, retaliation escalated rapidly and the conflict crossed from protest into sustained ethnic warfare. Hence, identity-based fears transformed a legal dispute into a broader ethnic confrontation. Therefore, the causes of the conflict were cumulative rather than instantaneous. They included land and resource disputes, protection anxieties, demographic change, competition over political power, and the perception that state institutions were uneven in their treatment of communities.

Environmental evictions and the crackdown on poppy cultivation were interpreted by many hill residents as measures that ignored livelihood dependence and reinforced valley-centric priorities.

## **The Consequences of Violence**

### **Mortality, Displacement, and Property Destruction**

According to the Times of India (TOI) report, the ongoing conflict in Manipur has cost 260 lives and over 1,500 injuries since May 2023 (Times of India, 2025). An Amnesty International report indicated that about 50,000 have been displaced in Manipur and over 58, 000 lives are under 281 relief homes since 3 May 2025. There is a high possibility that the injuries are even higher than what the records show. People were also forced to move to the neighbouring states, such as Mizoram and Meghalaya, due to Safety concerns (Amnesty International, 2025).

**Figure 2: A destroyed house after conflict between Kukis and Meiteis along a highway in Torbung village in Churachandpur district, Manipur, May 3, 2023.**



Source: Human Rights Watch



Figure 3: Homes have been vandalised and burned in the ethnic clashes and rioting that have gripped Manipur in India for nearly a year.



Source: Aljazeera

Besides, the destruction of the property was on a massive scale. A large number of business infrastructures, academic institutions, medical centres, and agricultural estates were burned down. According to Observer Research Foundation (ORF), the number of arson incidents resulting from the conflict has been about 5,000, including 4,700 homes being burned down and 386 religious locations vandalised, 254 churches (mostly Kuki) and 132 temples (Behera, 2023).

### Physical and Psychological Impact

There is also a great deal of sexual violence due to the conflict. Many women have been targets of rape as well as physical assault by both communities as a way of provoking terror and humiliation. One prominent incident occurred on May 4, 2023, when a group of Meitei men publicly abducted and allegedly gang-raped two Kuki women. These instances of gender-based violence operated as instruments of terror, intended to destabilize the targeted population and inflict profound psychological trauma (Lohan, 2024). Subsequently, in November 2024, another



severe escalation took place when roughly 35-armed Kuki militants launched an assault on a Central Reserve Police Force camp and a police paramilitary unit. During this attack, the insurgents killed and sexually assaulted three women and three children - including an eight-month-old infant - from the Meitei community, while also fatally burning two elderly male residents (Human Rights Watch, 2025). According to reports, on May 15, 2023, an 18-year-old girl was kidnapped, said in her First Information Report (FIR), "I was taken to a hill where they tortured and assaulted me. Whatever miserable things they could do to me, they did," According to her family and Kuki organisations, the injuries and trauma she suffered never healed, leaving her physically fragile and psychologically withdrawn until her death (SabrangIndia, 2026). Moreover, women in the relief camps have reported persistent intrusive memories of those moments: "I still hear the screams" or "Every time I close my eyes, I see our house on fire," as some have expressed in interviews (Hasan, Singh, & Singh, 2026, p. 35). Consequently, the continuous state of fear and high stress has triggered various psychological conditions, including depression, anxiety, PTSD, and chronic sleep disturbances like insomnia. For instance, during a violent confrontation with security forces attempting to evacuate Meitei people from Churachandpur on May 5, 2023, a young woman named Bonny was shot. Although, with the medical treatment, her physical injuries are healed, but she is still troubled by the nightmares, difficulties when talking in her sleep, and overwhelming PTSD irrespective of her medication and treatment (Das, Kamei, & Gangmei, 2024). The prevalence rate is highest with 19.9 per cent, which is nearly twice the national prevalence rate of 10.6 per cent, showing the necessity of addressing mental health agencies to the population in question (Kapoor, 2024).

Figure 4: A Kuki-Zo community-run relief camp inside a cemetery compound in Manipur's Churachandpur district, for displaced communities in March 2025.



Source: Human Rights Watch

It is hard to endure such trauma as to be deprived of their homes and not know their future either, by adults or children. Most of the displaced individuals who stayed in camps were frightened and anxious. Furthermore, the camps are congested, lacking in basic food, sanitation waste, and employment. This heightens health issues in the camps because privacy and sanitation at the camps are lacking. The camps did not possess health care in the form of medicine and physicians and nurses to assist people. The delivered assistance was not sufficient, and the food was inadequate most of the time. Moreover, there were transportation and warehousing issues, so sometimes the orders were received in poor conditions (Lohan, 2024).

Figure 5: Internally displaced persons (IDPs), living in relief camps, react during a protest rally demanding their resettlement in their native places, in Imphal, Manipur, August 1, 2024.



Source: Agarwala, T. (November 7, 2024). Ethnic violence in India's Manipur escalates, six killed. Reuters.

### Economic Impact and Loss of Livelihood

The initial impact of the conflict was experienced in the form of displacement leading to an economic catastrophe, as people from various industries had to lose their sectors and businesses and focus on safety. Firstly, the agricultural sector was largely affected because approximately 52 per cent of Manipur's population engages in agriculture. Rice is the chief food that is grown in the hills and in the plains in Manipur. The persistence of violence has dealt a massive blow to farmers, forcing numerous farmers to abandon their villages and fields, particularly in the most violent areas (Das Et. al., 2024, p. 1181). Likewise, the fisheries industry, especially around Pumlen Lake, has also been severely affected. Fishing is the primary source of livelihood for many families in the region. Prior to the eruption

of ethnic violence, the average daily income of fishing households was INR 496.67, ranging from INR 350 to 600. Following the conflict, market excavations were closed provisionally, and economic activities were halted altogether. Today, fishing households receive an average income of INR 253.33, and the minimum and maximum are INR 100 to 400 in income and sales. There has been a steep decline in both income and sales (Meitei, 2024). Furthermore, the ongoing unrest has dealt a severe blow to the textile industry. Traditional Manipuri fabrics such as Miraing pee, Rirum, Singpee, and Panthenek – which typically see strong international demand in the United States, Europe, and Singapore – have faced sharp declines. The violence has triggered a staggering 80% drop in exports across hand-woven textiles, medicines, and food items. This downturn heavily impacts a massive economic sector that supports over 462,000 weavers (the second-largest artisan population in India) and operates more than 280,000 looms (ranking fourth nationwide) (Ghosal, 2023). Also, the state tourism department indicated, the number of tourists that visited the state decreased significantly in 2022-23 by 1,61,420 to fewer than 37,000 tourists in the subsequent year. Such a radical fall shows how the conflict affected the Manipuri economy and its positive image as a touristic attraction site (Mukherjee, 2024). Above all, the conflict has led to inflation level that has never been witnessed before. Inflation has reached 11.63 per cent in the retail sector; this has impacted the locals as well as the companies. The Secretary of the Manipur Chamber of Commerce and Industry claims that the business environment is ruined to an extent of zero (Singh, 2024). The GST collection made by the state is also subject to economic pressure, as it has gone down by 24 per cent to INR 1,095 million during the first quarter of 2024. This is unlike the general growth of GST in India, which has shown a good percentage increase of more than 10 per cent. The overall effect of such unrest in different sectors reflects the great economic cost of the unrelenting violence that has been exerted on Manipur, threatening its present and future development (Das Et. al., 2024, pp. 1182-83).



## Response of the Government and Civil Society

The study distinguishes analytically between the actions of the Manipur State Government, Union Government institutions, security forces, and the higher judiciary to avoid treating the State as a single, homogeneous actor. Therefore, the security response should be understood as involving multiple institutions rather than representing the actions of a single, unified state apparatus.

## Security Force Deployment and Military Strategy

The BJP run state government, which is headed by the Chief Minister, N. Biren Singh, has gained much criticism with regard to how it has managed the situation. On May 4 2023, the Manipur State government ordered the shoot-at-sight (Karmakar, 2023). The state government resorted to oppressive acts which included curfew and internet blockage in eight districts, which included non-tribal dominated Imphal West, Kakching, Thoubal, Jiribam, and Bishnupur districts, and tribal areas of Churachandpur, Kangpokpi, and Tengnoupal districts (Das, 2023; Dhillon, 2023). These actions significantly disturbed normal life as most of the locals were unable to move by traveling, socialize with other human beings, travel to work, or even to school. It was a challenge to the individuals in the state that was socially and economically harsh (South Asia Terrorism Portal, 2024). When the violence began, Singh alleged a lack of ethnic dimension of the violence instead he shifted the blame for this violence to the terrorists and the intruders (Sen and Sarkar, 2023).

Figure 6: Armed forces in action



Source: India: Ethnic Clashes Restart in Manipur. Human Rights

Furthermore, the Prime Minister Modi took 79 days to respond to the existing violence. However, it was reported that by May 14, 126 columns and 62 companies of paramilitary forces were deployed in the region by the central government (Hindustan Times, 2023). It was among the largest security operations Manipur has experienced in the last few years (Sen and Sarkar, 2023; Vivekananda International Foundation, 2023). As a result, 50 weapons recovery interventions have been concluded in 2026, 390 in 2025, 310 in 2024, and 139 in 2023. The fact that 3,134 arms have been recovered during the President's rule, including 2,035 of the weaponry in the valleys and 1,099 in the hill groups, signifies the meeting of the efforts by the Manipur Police, the Central Armed Police Forces, the Assam rifles, the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) and the Indian Army in slowly defeating the violence resources (Old SATP, 2017; Shaheen, 2026).

Figure 7: Armed forces deployed in the conflict zone in Manipur



Source: The Economist. Ethnic conflict festers on India's eastern frontier



Figure 8: Joint Columns of Security Forces have recovered a huge cache of arms and ammunition in combing operations in the general area Sagolmang of Imphal East district in Manipur



Source: Manipur: Security forces recover huge cache of arms, ammunition. The Assam Tribune

As per a report by the Manipur state Government, 665 members of 25 different militant groups were arrested and 3,134 guns were seized on August 11, 2025 by the combined effort of the state and central security forces (Old SATP, 2017). Among the arrested, only 19 were tied to hill-based organizations like the Manipur Naga Revolutionary Front (MNRFF), the United Kuki Liberation Front (UKLF), among others. The majority of them were, on the other hand, related to valley-based organizations, including the Kangleipak Communist party (KCP), the Revolutionary people front (RPF)/ People's Liberation Army (PLA), among others. By March 7, 2026, 149 terrorists have been caught in 123 different cases, 1,146 arrests in 797 incidents in 2025, and 378 arrests in 162 incidents in 2024 (Shaheen, 2026). Here, the arrest statistics appear inconsistent with allegations of state bias because security forces arrested substantially larger numbers of members belonging to

valley-based militant organisations than hill-based groups. However, these figures largely reflect the operational role of Union security agencies – including the Army, Assam Rifles, Central Armed Police Forces, and central intelligence agencies – which increasingly assumed responsibility for restoring order after the breakdown of state administration. Therefore, arrest statistics should not automatically be interpreted as evidence regarding the political neutrality or otherwise of the Manipur State Government. Rather, they illustrate the differentiated roles performed by various institutions within India's multi-layered security architecture.

### **Agreement between the Government and insurgent groups**

The Kuki-Zo insurgent group signed a subsequent joint operating agreement with the Union Ministry of Home Affairs (UMHA) and the Government of Manipur on September 4, 2025. Cadres were validated, a specified camp was designated, and ground rules were updated, as well as the location of the camp. Meanwhile, special legal measures persisted (Singh, 2025). The September 2025 Joint Operating Agreement must be understood within the broader history of the Suspension of Operations (SoO) arrangements signed in 2008 between the Government of India, the Government of Manipur and several Kuki-Zo insurgent organisations. The original SoO agreements were intended to suspend armed hostilities, confine insurgent cadres to designated camps, prohibit movement with weapons outside camps, and facilitate political dialogue while reducing violence (Ibid., 2025). However, relations between the Manipur Government and several SoO groups deteriorated in the years preceding the 2023 ethnic conflict. The state government accused certain insurgent organisations of violating ground rules and assisting illegal migration and poppy cultivation, while Kuki-Zo organisations alleged that the government was politicising the agreement and targeting tribal communities. This mutual distrust contributed to the effective breakdown of cooperation before the outbreak of violence in May 2023. Against this background, the Joint Operating Agreement signed on 4 September 2025 represented a revision rather than an



entirely new SoO arrangement. Instead of replacing the 2008 framework, it sought to strengthen implementation by introducing stricter verification of cadres, compulsory Aadhaar-based identification, reaffirmation of designated camps, revised monitoring mechanisms, and tighter enforcement of movement restrictions under updated ground rules. The revised framework aimed to restore confidence in the ceasefire mechanism and reduce opportunities for armed mobilisation after the breakdown witnessed during the 2023 violence. However, even with a high number of security forces deployed, violence was witnessed over a period of a few months. Clashes and tensions continued even after the arrival of army and paramilitary personnel, and conflict monitoring organizations were reported. This means that the mere existence of security forces is usually insufficient to settle bitter ethnic and political disputes. Human rights organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have also addressed the problems caused by the security forces, such as not being able to provide security to civilians and arresting people without reason. The Supreme Court of India has also said that the situation is out of control and cannot be solved by using security measures alone (Amnesty International, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2023). While curfews and movement restrictions did reduce some violence, the internet blockade and restrictions on activities made people frustrated and angry. Hence, these security measures were not all successful (SATP, 2024).

#### **Accountability Failures, Investigative Limitations and Judicial Actions.**

It was reported that the state police sometimes take a longer time to register complaints or do not write down important information given by the victims. In some cases, police officers refused to register the complaints of minority groups, even when they were hurt by mobs. For example, there was a case of violence in Kangpokpi that was reported on May 4, 2023, where a woman was allegedly gang-raped by a group of men. The local police knew about the incident but did not act accordingly, and only some cases have had FIRs filed (Sen and Sarkar, 2024; Outlookindia, 2024). The survivor, who was abducted and gang-raped in May 2023

during the initial days of the Meitei-Kuki ethnic clashes, passed away on January 10, 2026, while undergoing treatment in Guwahati. Her death – without arrests, without accountability, and without closure – now stands as a stark indictment of the state’s response to sexual violence in conflict zones, and a reminder of the human cost of prolonged inaction (SabrangIndia, 2026). The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) only stepped in after intense pressure built up when a video of the event finally surfaced – that reveal delayed for months by a regional internet blackout. Meanwhile, the Supreme Court began reviewing investigation records linked to political conspiracies. This development aligns with claims from a former official regarding a forensic audit of 2025 recordings, which reportedly expose senior government figures orchestrating attacks on Kuki villages while guaranteeing immunity for the perpetrators (Prakash, 2026). On June 4, 2023, the central government increased the scope of the three-member Inquiry Commission led by Ajai Lamba, the former Chief Justice of the Gauhati High Court. This commission is mandated to look into the cause and spread of ethnic violence that occurred in May 2023, its deadline is set to May 20, 2026. The Commission will investigate administrative failures and provide recommendations to avoid future occurrences (MHA, 2023). Moreover, on September 26, 2025, UMHA extended the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA), whose extension included the entire state, except 13 of an estimated 276 jurisdictions of police stations in five districts, terming the rest of the areas as being disturbed (The Hindu, 2025). Furthermore, the NIA is attempting to prosecute high-profile cases, such as the prosecution of the KNA Chief on February 2, 2026, for an alleged conspiracy to separate and wage war, and convicting a person on January 29, 2026, for the kidnapping and killing of six Meitei civilians in the District of Jiribam in November 2024 (Lakshman, 2025). The accountability process also reflected important institutional differences within the Indian state. While allegations of administrative bias and delayed responses were primarily directed towards the Manipur State Government and sections of the state police, judicial institutions and central investigative agencies assumed an increasingly active role in reviewing the handling of the conflict. The intervention

of the Supreme Court, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), and the Commission of Inquiry demonstrates that different institutions responded in distinct ways to the crisis.

### **Towards Peace-building in Manipur**

The reaction of the government and the security agencies was not enough in the eyes of many local communities. Consequently, the civil society organisations and community groups came out to offer relief and foster peace at the ground level.

### **Women's Organisation Initiatives**

Women's organisations played a special role. One famous movement is the Manipur Women Gun Survivors Network, which was established by an activist, Binalakshmi Nepram. The network operates with women survivors of gun violence in Manipur, as well as other Northeast region of India. The organisation multiplied its work to assist the displaced communities in hundreds of villages in the course of the violence that started in May 2023. One of them was the creation of the so-called Peace Gardens in displacement camps, by which the families could be given the opportunity to grow their vegetables and fruits to access food and nutrition. The network held health and wellness training in some of the relief camps in 2024. Physical and psychological needs were addressed in the form of medical professionals and counsellors being invited to work with the survivors (Nepram, 2025). Other artistic activities that were put up by the organisation included music and painting classes. They were directed towards contributing to the emotional healing of people and the cohesion of the community among the displaced families. Psychosocial and livelihood recovery is also an issue of concern to the network. Volunteers provide counselling and corruption-free locations, whereby the survivors may tell their stories. In the meantime, there are skill development courses such as weaving, tailoring, food processing, and basket making, offered by the organisation. Through such programmes, displaced women can not only

improve their livelihoods, as they obtain income; they also feel independent once again, once deprived of homes, livelihoods, etc (Nepram, 2025).

Figure 9: Meira Paibis from across Manipur have come together to protest against the potential arrest of Arambai Tenggol leader Korounganba Khuman.



Source: Land is Life. (October 30, 2023). Indigenous Women Particularly At Risk in Brutal Inter-Ethnic Conflict in Manipur.

The other noteworthy programme is the Meira Paibi movement, usually translated as women torch-bearers. These groups consist of village women who work to protect their communities from crime and other problems. During times of unrest in the past, they have done things, like patrolling at night, helping families in need, and trying to prevent violence. During this 2023 conflict, on one hand, it was supplying night patrols, mediated at least not to resort to violence, and assisted suffering families. However, Conversely, the Meira Paibi has faced serious allegations of shielding Meitei militia members and attackers. According to the International Crisis Group (2025), the group has actively pressured the military into releasing detained insurgents. Furthermore, a First Information Report (FIR) filed by an 18-year-old kidnapping survivor from May 15, 2023, explicitly accuses

members of the organization of handing her over to her abductors (SabrangIndia, 2026).

### **Bridging and Bonding Civil Society in Ethnic Conflict**

Civil society is often viewed as an important actor in conflict resolution because it can provide humanitarian assistance, facilitate dialogue, and rebuild trust among conflict-affected communities. However, scholarship on ethnic conflict demonstrates that civil society is not a homogeneous entity. In deeply polarised societies, civil society organisations frequently mirror the social and political divisions existing within society. Consequently, some organisations perform a bridging role by fostering cooperation across communal boundaries, while others perform a bonding role by strengthening in-group solidarity and defending the interests of their own ethnic communities. Although both forms provide social support, their implications for peacebuilding differ significantly. The experience of Manipur illustrates this dual character of civil society. The Manipur Women Gun Survivors Network represents an example of bridging civil society. Its initiatives, including Peace Gardens, psychosocial counselling, livelihood support, and trauma healing, focus on reducing human suffering and rebuilding resilience among conflict-affected populations. Rather than promoting the interests of a single ethnic group, these programmes address common humanitarian needs and contribute to rebuilding trust, social cohesion, and long-term peace. By contrast, sections of the Meira Paibi movement illustrate characteristics of bonding civil society. Historically, the organisation has played an important role in protecting local communities, preventing crime, and supporting families during periods of unrest. However, during the 2023 ethnic conflict, allegations that some members shielded valley-based militants, pressured security forces to release detained insurgents, and interfered with criminal investigations suggest that ethnic solidarity may, at times, have taken precedence over the principles of impartial justice and the rule of law. Such actions demonstrate how civil society organisations can become embedded within the conflict itself rather than

functioning as neutral peace actors. This divergence reflects the broader dynamics of protracted ethnic conflict. As trust in state institutions declines and communities increasingly perceive existential threats, civil society organisations often become more accountable to their own constituencies than to broader democratic or humanitarian principles. Under such circumstances, organisations that originally emerged for community welfare may gradually evolve into defenders of collective ethnic interests, thereby reinforcing existing social divisions. Therefore, the case of Manipur demonstrates that civil society performs both constructive and contradictory functions. While bridging civil society contributes to reconciliation, humanitarian relief, and inter-community cooperation, bonding civil society may reinforce ethnic polarisation, legitimise communal mobilisation, and unintentionally obstruct peacebuilding and formal institutions of justice. Recognising this dual character is essential for understanding both the opportunities and limitations of civil society in deeply divided societies.

### **Civil Society Relief Provision and Camp Management**

Despite the divergent roles played by different civil society organisations, several humanitarian and community-based groups served as important bridges between conflict-affected communities, security forces, and government agencies by coordinating relief, communicating local needs, and supporting displaced populations. These organisations were mostly closely aligned with the local churches, youth associations, and networks (Das, Et. al., 2024, p. 1180). Particularly, church-based organisations acted as significant sources of humanitarian aid. They provided temporary shelters, food, clothes, and healthcare services to the displaced individuals of other ethnic and religious communities as well (Hasan, Singh, & Singh, 2026, p. 36). Nevertheless, the capacity of the church organisations and grassroots groups to carry on with relief activities weakened due to financial weaknesses or challenges in the way they operated.



Figure 10: Community in action in relief camp management. Source: Ethnic conflict drags on in Manipur in India's north-east.



Source: The Economist

Ultimately, Union Home Minister, Shri Amit Shah, on 3 April, 2025, said that online arrangements for technical and medical education have been made, and for primary education, classes have been set up inside the camps, where arrangements for their studies have been made (MHA, 2025). It was only in July 2025, over two years after violence broke out, that the state government declared a three-phase rehabilitation plan. The rehabilitation programme consisted of three broad stages. The first phase focused on facilitating the safe return of families to villages where security conditions had improved. The second phase targeted households whose homes had been destroyed, providing financial assistance in instalments for reconstruction together with basic infrastructure support. The final phase was designed for families who could not safely return to their original villages because of continuing ethnic segregation or security concerns, with the government proposing the construction of approximately 1,000 permanent housing units in alternative locations. To this effect, the government hopes to shut down all relief camps by 2025. The scheme involves financial contributions for the

reconstruction of houses. An initial amount of 130,000, and later 173,000, was given to families (Kalita, 2025; Hindustan Times, 2025). Nevertheless, implementation fell considerably behind schedule. By early 2026, a substantial number of displaced families continued to remain in relief camps despite the government's target of closing them by the end of 2025. Several factors contributed to this outcome. First, recurring episodes of violence and the absence of mutual trust prevented many displaced persons from returning to ethnically mixed localities. Second, reconstruction of damaged houses progressed more slowly than anticipated despite financial assistance, while many villages lacked adequate security guarantees. Third, communities increasingly became territorially segregated, making voluntary return politically and socially difficult. Finally, repeated protests, highway blockades and renewed violence further interrupted rehabilitation efforts and demonstrated that humanitarian recovery could not proceed independently of political reconciliation. Consequently, although the rehabilitation framework represented an important policy initiative, its implementation remained incomplete because the underlying causes of conflict had not yet been resolved.

### **A Way Forward**

After three years of conflict, Manipur is still on edge. On 7 April 2026, violence has erupted yet again in Manipur killing two children, aged five and six, from the Meitei community and injured their mother in an afternoon bombing at a house in the Tronglaobi Awang Leikai area in Manipur's Bishnupur district. Following the incident, Organisations called for shutting down towns, and men, women and youth came out in protests, setting up blockades and clashing with the police. Some demonstrators set oil tankers on fire. The main road linking Bishnupur to Kuki-dominated Churachandpur has remained blocked for two weeks. The clashes between protesters – who were demanding the arrest of killers – and security forces have left at least seven people killed, over dozen people injured and more than a twelve arrested. The Meitei leaders accused the Kuki fighters of this. However, the Kuki groups denied involvement, saying the village was not close to



their areas of access. Nonetheless, a fragile peace was shattered again in the state (Sharma, 2026). Moreover, the persistence of displacement despite the rehabilitation programme illustrates that physical reconstruction alone cannot restore normalcy without parallel progress in security, inter-community trust and political dialogue. These continuing shortcomings became evident in the renewed violence witnessed during April 2026, as discussed above. Hence, the study finds that a long-term peace must involve dialogue among all conflict-affected parties. Local actors are usually in a better position to interpret the conflict dynamics than the external actors and can be used to foster trust between communities. Likewise, farmers who used to rely on poppy farming as a source of income should also be given special treatment. The transition programmes can assist such farmers to switch to the legal crops by offering the farmer seeds, training, market access, and analysis of funds in the transition period. Environmental and forest management policies must also consider having the local communities participate in decision-making. In addition, the situation should also be stabilised through disarmament. Disarmament programmes may be voluntary, and the governments may provide incentives like giving money or even assisting in the development of the people who give up arms. Most importantly, sustainable peace in Manipur must tackle the socio-economic inequalities that are causing resentments and instability. The development gaps in many of the hills are quite high compared to the valley areas. By enhancing access to education, healthcare, infrastructure, and livelihood opportunities, it is possible to ease the economic grievances and ensure social stability. The implementation of development programmes should be done in an inclusive and fair manner in order to benefit all the communities. Communities that feel the positive results of the improvement of their living conditions can more easily contribute to peace programmes and are less inclined to get involved in violence in the future.

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## Leadership Personality and Foreign Policy Decision - Making: A Comparative Analysis of Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, and Xi Jinping <sup>1</sup>

Kajol Biswakarma <sup>2</sup>

In today's world of politics, the leadership styles of three major world leaders, Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, and Xi Jinping, and how they affect policy decisions are of the utmost importance. This paper analyzes how the distinct personalities of these leaders affect the foreign policy decision-making process and how they are similar and different. This paper follows a qualitative, comparative, case study method which primarily uses secondary, already published data. Analysis shows that Trump has a foreign policy decision-making style characterized by dominance, impulsiveness, and a lack of complex thought, while Putin has a preference for centralizing, authoritarian, obstructive, and reckless decision-making, and a desire for restoration of a perceived status and risk-absorption for the sake of security. On the other hand, the analysis also highlights that Xi Jinping is characterized by a comprehensive, disciplined, and ideologically consistent approach to foreign policy, and a belief in the centrality of China's comprehensive power to achieve its ends. This research shows that the style of decision-making in foreign policy can alter the means of diplomacy and affect the balance of power in international politics. This study also broadens a previously narrow discourse of leadership and foreign policy in international relations.

**Keywords:** leadership personality, foreign policy decision making, Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, international relations

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In today's world, foreign policies affect global political stability, economic relations between countries, and international security. Because the world is becoming more uncertain, powerful countries are competing, and many crises are happening, it is essential to examine how foreign policies are formulated and implemented. Many international relations scholars focus on systems, institutions, and state interests, but emerging new literature shows that individual leaders also play an important role. Political leaders not only represent their country's interests but are also shaped by personal beliefs and individual traits that affect their worldview. Combining political science and psychology helps to understand these patterns and their effect. Decision-making is not only influenced by institutional frameworks but also by other factors. People's thoughts, feelings, and past experiences also shape how individuals interpret issues and determine their responses. Scholars have highlighted psychology as a crucial factor in explaining political behavior and decision-making (Ramesh, 2022). So, studying a leader's personality is important to understand how and why a country's behaviour changes in foreign policy. Smith (2012) says that foreign policy is decided by individuals, and studying leaders' traits, motivations, and beliefs helps explain their decisions.

A number of gaps have been discovered in the current literature on leadership and international politics. A major problem is that although some studies examine how a leader's personality affects international relations, most of the literature, such as Kaarbo (2017), focuses on past leaders rather than current ones. This is why such studies do not provide sufficient understanding of the current global political situation. Also, many studies, like Ramesh (2022), describe leaders' traits and their general impact on the international system. However, they do not clearly explain how these traits influence foreign policy decisions. These studies often only describe things instead of explaining them. So, the connection between personality and decision-making is not explored enough. Many studies only focus on the state. They ignore the role of individual leaders (Hafner-Burton et al., 2013). As a result, the role of a leader's personality in foreign policy decisions is often ignored.

All these limitations show that the link between a leader's personality traits and



foreign policy decision-making is still not well studied. Therefore, further in-depth and systematic research is required in this area. To fill these gaps, this study examines leaders' personality traits and carefully analyzes how these traits influence foreign policy decisions in today's world. It is essential to study and understand how a leader's personality affects foreign policy decisions, especially in the world's largest economies. This is due to the fact that their decisions can have a direct and immediate impact on global stability and competition. This research studies the relationship between leadership personality and foreign policy decision-making of leaders of the largest economies; specifically, this study attempts to understand the leadership of Vladimir Putin, Donald Trump, and Xi Jinping. The main objective of this research is to address the existing gap between the personality of leaders and foreign policy decision-making, specifically to offer an intensive analysis of this relationship in contemporary global politics. This study aims to reinforce the role of the personality of leaders in determining foreign policy conduct, especially in relation to the analysis of personality in leadership and foreign policy. This work is presented in multiple parts, which include the introduction as the current section, literature review, methodology, findings, discussion of findings, and finally conclusion.

### **Literature Review**

The increasing personalization of today's politics, particularly with respect to Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, and Xi Jinping, has stimulated research on individual leaders and how they influence the formulation of foreign policy. Although a thorough understanding of systemic and domestic factors is still essential, a considerable amount of research in foreign policy analysis (FPA) and political psychology shows that the personality, beliefs, and decision-making styles of leaders can shape how a given state perceives and acts on the international environment (Cuhadar et al., 2017; Medeiros et al., 2022).

In contrast, structural realists believe that there is a dominant pattern in the international system which dictates how states behave, allowing little scope for leaders to act independently and to make autonomous decisions. Based on this

perspective, great powers act in similar ways because they face the same structural limits. It does not matter who the leader is. This is because survival, secrecy, and material interests tend to outweigh individual preferences (Waltz, 2000, 2015). The argument shows that there is still a gap in research. It is necessary to identify when a leader's personality strongly influences the decisions, and when system forces become more important. This study draws on several important theoretical approaches, including Margaret Hermann's Leadership Trait Theory and its operationalisation through Leadership Trait Analysis, Richard Snyder's work on Foreign Policy Decision-Making (FPDM), and Robert Jervis's contributions to the political psychology of perception and misperception. Together, these perspectives help explain how leadership personalities can shape the foreign policy behaviour of leaders such as Trump, Putin, and Xi.

Three aspects are particularly relevant in this context. To begin with, leadership personality refers to the way leaders think, what drives them, and how they interact with others. These elements influence how power is understood and exercised, and are often examined through Leadership Trait Analysis (Hermann, 2003). Secondly, foreign policy decision-making focuses on the processes through which leaders and their advisory groups formulate and choose policies in response to external challenges (Al-Najjar & Husien, 2022). Finally, political psychology provides insight into how a leader's beliefs, perceptions, and cognitive biases shape their decisions. It also helps in understanding how these decisions, in turn, affect the broader international system (Jervis, 2017). This study looks at three main areas : (1) it examines key theories by Hermann, Snyder, and Jervis, (2) it studies research on how leaders' personal traits affect foreign policy with particular focus on leaders such as Trump and Putin, and (3) it explores new studies on Xi, ideology, and personalist authoritarianism. The study follows a clear structure. It starts with theory, then explains the process, and finally looks at real examples of major world leaders. The review focuses on studies that clearly connect leaders' personal traits with their foreign policy decisions. It mainly focuses on qualitative and mixed-method research in foreign policy analysis.

### **Theoretical Frameworks: Hermann, Snyder, Jervis and the Role of Structure**

Hermann's Leadership Trait Analysis (LTA) and the research offered in this report cover a number of leadership and personality traits that can be analyzed through the verbal output of a leader's spontaneous comments. Some of the analyzed types of traits, which correspond with different leadership styles (i.e., constraint-respecting vs. constraint-challenging, directive vs. consultative), and also influence the pattern of foreign policy behavior, are the following: belief in ability to control events, power need, cognitive and relational complexity, distrust of other people, in-group bias, and task versus relationship focus. Ultimately, these traits contribute to explaining how leaders process and respond to different constraining factors, and ultimately make the decisions they do regarding foreign policy (Hermann, 2003). Snyder's description of foreign policy decision making puts a focus on the idea of the 'decision unit', along with the broader institutional and bureaucratic context where decisions take place. Decision making by leaders is not an isolated, independent act. This shows that context is critically important to explain what influence leaders can exert, for example, for instance, in situations where there are limited constraints within an advisory system, an organization's decision-making process, and the relevant domestic political system. It also explains how structural and domestic factors influence decisions. However, it still considers the role of individual policymakers (Al-Najjar & Husien, 2022). This study uses Robert Jervis's ideas to understand how leaders think. It looks at how wrong understanding and information processing shape how leaders see global events. A leader's beliefs shape how they see threats and how they respond to other countries. Even if the system is the same, these reactions shape foreign policy outcomes. This explains how perception affects decisions in international politics (Jervis, 2017).

A structural realist perspective says that individual leadership does not matter much. This is because states mainly focus on survival in the international system. Therefore, countries respond in similar ways, irrespective of the leaders (Waltz, 2000). But, in practice, leaders facing the same situation respond differently. Some

become more aggressive while others may take fewer risks in the same situation. This means that the system guides behavior, but it does not control everything. This creates a kind of contradiction. So, while studying both systems, the role of individual leaders should be taken into account.

### **Structure, Agency, and Foreign Policy Decision-Making**

A key debate in foreign policy analysis is about what shapes foreign policy the most. Some scholars focus on the international system, while others focus on individual leaders. Kenneth Waltz and structural realists emphasize the role of the international system. They argue that the distribution of power and security concerns shape state behaviour. From this perspective, leaders have limited freedom to act independently. Their decisions are influenced by external pressures and national interests. As a result, foreign policy is largely seen as a response to the international system. On the other hand, scholars such as Margaret Hermann and Robert Jervis focus on the role of individual leaders. They argue that leaders do not always interpret threats, opportunities, and information in the same way. Because of this, leaders facing similar situations may make different foreign policy choices. A leader's personality and way of thinking can influence how a state responds to international challenges. From this perspective, structural factors and leadership psychology are not competing explanations. Both work together to shape foreign policy decisions.

However, foreign policy cannot be explained only by the international system or by a leader's personality. Many other factors also influence decision-making. These include historical experiences, domestic politics, institutions, and foreign relations. Strategic culture also shapes how states view their role in the world and how they respond to threats and opportunities. Historical experiences and political traditions influence national priorities over time. Domestic politics is equally important. Political institutions, bureaucracies, advisors, public opinion, and interest groups all play a role in shaping policy. Sometimes these factors support a leader's decisions, while at other times they limit or change them. As a result, foreign policy is shaped by the interaction of leadership, institutions, domestic politics, and

historical circumstances. Foreign policy is usually shaped by several factors. Leadership is one of them. However, leadership works alongside structural conditions, strategic culture, domestic politics, and institutions. Together, these factors influence how foreign policy is made and implemented. This study mainly focuses on leadership personality. At the same time, it recognizes the importance of domestic and international factors. This provides the basis for a comparative analysis of Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, and Xi Jinping and their approaches to foreign policy.

### **Mechanisms Linking Personality and Foreign Policy**

#### **Threat perception**

Leaders who do not trust others and have simple thinking often see unclear situations as threats. They may misunderstand the intentions of others. Because of this, they are more likely to respond with conflict or aggression (Hermann, 2003; Jervis, 2017). This increases the likelihood of choosing coercion or acting early.

#### **Risk-taking**

In foreign policy, a leader's willingness to take risks during a crisis depends on their self-confidence. It also depends on how much they want control and dominance (Hermann, 2003).

#### **Advisor selection and management**

Leaders' personalities affect the choices and management of advisors. A highly self-confident leader may control everything and reduce opposition. This makes policies reflect the leader's personality (Hermann, 2003; Al-Najjar & Husien, 2022).

#### **Decision processes and information processing**

Leaders with high conceptual complexity can think in a more detailed way. They consider more options and look at new evidence. Because of this, they make more careful and well-thought-out decisions (Hermann, 2003; Jervis, 2017). All these factors together help explain how personality connects with foreign policy decisions, especially in the cases of Trump, Putin, and Xi.

#### **Empirical Insights**

## **Trump and Putin**

Studies on strong and populist leaders show some common traits like high confidence, distrust of others, and a preference for personal control. These traits can make foreign policy more assertive and sometimes less cooperative. In the case of Donald Trump, research using Leadership Trait Analysis and Operational Code Analysis points to traits like dominance, impulsiveness, and lower conceptual complexity (White, 2022). Because of this, his foreign policy often focused strongly on national interest, but at the same time it could appear inconsistent or unpredictable (Özdamar et al., 2023). These traits also affect how threats are seen and how decisions are made. Leaders like this may take more risks, depend less on advisors, and rely more on their own judgement. This can make foreign policy more personal and sometimes difficult to predict (White, 2022). In that sense, Trump's foreign policy often looked unpredictable, even though there were some patterns behind it. However, it was actually shaped by his personality traits and beliefs. So, his actions were not completely random. His style of making quick deals and using provocative language made him seem unpredictable. But his actions still showed some consistency (Bentley & Lerner, 2021). Here, Snyder's FPDM approach helps explain how Trump's leadership style worked within a strong but divided advisory system. At the same time, Jervis's political psychology explains his simple way of thinking and that he often distrusts both friends and rivals. Trump's foreign policy cannot be explained only by his personality traits. Peterson (2018) argues that foreign policy behaviour is shaped by both leaders and broader structural forces, including institutional arrangements and international political conditions. This view is similar to Kenneth Waltz's structural realism. Waltz argues that the international system creates opportunities and constraints for states. From this perspective, a leadership personality is important. However, it must be understood within the wider international political context.

In Putin's case, recent studies using Leadership Trait Analysis show that his thinking is less complex. He tends to see the world in a rigid and "either-or" way. This kind of thinking seems to have pushed policies in a more forceful and escalating direction, especially during the invasion of Ukraine. At the same time, Putin appears to have a strong belief in his own ability to control events. There is also a clear preference for

maintaining control, which shapes the way he leads. His style tends to centralise power, push against limits, and at times take significant risks in order to restore status and security. His personality also affects how threats are understood. NATO expansion and Ukraine's increasing independence are not seen as neutral developments, but as serious challenges. This helps explain why he has been willing to take major risks, even when the military and economic costs are high. Decision-making, meanwhile, remains restricted to a small circle of trusted advisors, which further reinforces a personalised approach to foreign policy (Terkulova, 2023; Novruzov, 2024; Wulandari, 2025). The studies highlight that even in the context of strong structural drivers – NATO expansion, regional rivalries, domestic polarization, – the variation of leaders' traits helps to explain the variation in the timing, framing, and mechanisms of foreign policy actions. However, Russian foreign policy cannot be explained solely through the personality of its leaders. Tsygankov (2012) emphasizes the importance of Russia's strategic culture, historical experiences, and great-power identity in shaping its behaviour on the international stage. This suggests that while Putin's personality plays an important role, foreign policy decisions are also influenced by broader political and geopolitical factors.

### **Xi Jinping, Ideology, and Personalized Authoritarian Leadership**

Research on Xi Jinping is less available compared to Trump and Putin, particularly studies using systematic methods like Leadership Trait Analysis. One reason is the strict control over information about Xi. Political and language barriers also make research difficult. Nevertheless, studies indicate that Xi has consolidated his control over power. He has moved away from the earlier system that limited individual authority after Mao. Instead, he has concentrated power in both the state and the Communist Party. This breaks from the earlier practice of collective leadership (Shirk, 2018). Recent studies have also highlighted the institutional dimension of Xi's leadership. Cabestan (2017) argues that Xi strengthened his control over foreign and security policy through institutional reforms. These changes increased the role of the top leadership in policymaking. Cabestan (2021) further notes that the reforms strengthened central foreign policy institutions and expanded Xi's influence over foreign and security policy.

His leadership is also marked by more assertive and clear policies. For example, he promotes ideas like “Major Country Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics.” He also actively pushes for the expansion of China’s core interests (Iida, 2020). These policies have further contributed to Xi’s political power. Studies of his public speeches show that his individual leadership style influences China’s foreign policy. He often talks about national rejuvenation, strategic goals, and global leadership. All of this highlights the significance of his personal role in shaping China’s foreign policy (Douglas, 2017). However, some scholars argue that China’s foreign policy should not be understood only through Xi’s personality. Zhang (2015) points out that China’s growing global influence, national interests, and long-term goals have also shaped its more active foreign policy. This suggests that leadership personality is only one factor. Domestic and international conditions also influence foreign policy decisions. Overall, the literature shows that leadership personality can be especially important in foreign policy. This is often the case when leaders hold significant power and operate in uncertain international environments. However, personality alone cannot explain foreign policy. Leaders are also influenced by state structures, institutions, and domestic politics. Foreign policy is shaped by the interaction between leadership personality and the broader political context. Although many studies have examined Trump, Putin, and Xi separately, there are fewer comparative studies that examine all three together. This creates a gap in understanding how personality influences foreign policy across different political systems.

### **Methodology**

This study uses behavioral leadership theory and foreign policy analysis. It also uses psychological studies of Trump, Putin, and Xi. It examines how their personalities influence policy-making by using a qualitative comparative case study. It also looks at how this shapes their foreign policy choices.

The research combines three related theories. These are : Hermann’s Leadership Trait Analysis (LTA), Snyder’s Foreign Policy Decision Making (FPDM) Framework, and Jervis’s Political Psychology of Perception and Misperception. LTA provides different traits to study leaders. These include belief in control over events, power motivation,



conceptual complexity, distrust of others, and focus on tasks or relationships. These help us understand the personalities of the three leaders. Snyder's FPDM framework looks at how decisions are made. It focuses on decision-making groups, advisory systems, and institutional settings. Jervis's framework, on the other hand, studies perception, misperception, and cognitive biases. It helps explain how leaders assess threats and make strategic choices. These three frameworks support each other. They do not oppose one another. Hermann's Leadership Trait Analysis focuses on identifying leaders' personality traits. Jervis's political psychology explains how these traits shape leaders' perceptions and interpretations of world events. Snyder's Foreign Policy Decision-Making model examines how these perceptions are translated into decisions within institutional settings. Together, these frameworks help explain the link between leadership personality and foreign policy behaviour.

The qualitative secondary data used in this analysis are drawn from the scholarly literature, policy papers and analyses, published research on Leadership Trait Analysis (LTA), and the literature on the foreign policies of Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, and Xi Jinping. The intent of this study is not to conduct an original Leadership Trait Analysis by using primary data of speeches or interviews, but rather to consider the findings of previous research to analyze prominent leadership characteristics. The aim is not to create personality categories. Instead, it seeks to understand how leadership traits influence foreign policy decisions in different political settings. To do this, the study examines threat perception, risk-taking, advisor selection, and decision-making processes. Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, and Xi Jinping were selected because they are contemporary leaders of major powers and have had a significant impact on international politics. They differ in their political systems, institutions, and leadership styles. This makes them suitable for comparison. Studying these three leaders helps explain how personality influences foreign policy decisions in different political contexts. The findings section presents three case studies. Each case is linked to the relevant theoretical framework. The analysis uses secondary information on leadership traits and major foreign policy decisions. It also examines the four key mechanisms. The analysis uses a structured comparative approach. The same analytical framework is

applied to all three cases to ensure consistency. The discussion compares the cases side by side to examine the relationship between leadership personality and foreign policy behaviour. It also highlights differences in political systems, institutions, and broader international contexts.

## **Findings**

### **Case Study 1: Donald Trump's Leadership Personality and Foreign Policy Decision Making**

Donald Trump's foreign policy decision-making can be understood by using Hermann's Leadership Trait Analysis (LTA), Snyder's Foreign Policy Decision Making (FPDM) framework, and Jervis's political psychology together. Instead of seeing his actions as completely random, this approach explains how his personality, institutions, and thinking together shape foreign policy decisions. From an LTA perspective, Trump's personality is characterized by high-dominance, narcissistic, extroverted, and impulsive personality, characterized by a low level of behavioral conscientiousness, as well as a low level of behavioral or cognitive operational complexity (Immelman, 2017; Griebie, 2021). Within the context of "Psychological Profiling", these traits and personality features provide the basis for the "psychological foundation" of the "America First" approach, as well as the transactional and unpredictable nature of President Trump's foreign policy. His leadership style matches what Immelman (2017) calls an influential leadership orientation. It shows a strong desire for power, a belief in personal control, and an aggressive way of dealing with others. This type of leader tries to influence others and shape the global system. These traits are seen in his decision-making style. Trump often makes quick decisions without much thinking and focuses more on political gains than long-term planning (Immelman, 2017). He does not engage much with detailed briefings or structured policy plans. This further supports a simple and personalized style of decision making. Studies using LTA and Operational Code Analysis (OCA) show that he has a high level of distrust, especially toward those seen as outsiders. He also shows strong nationalism and in-group bias, which makes him less willing to cooperate with other countries (White, 2022). Snyder's FPDM framework explains how these traits work within the decision-making system. Trump's leadership is highly personal and

centered around the leader himself. As a result, institutional processes and advisory systems are often weakened or even ignored. After these disruptions, advisory systems became less organized, which increased the influence of Trump's personal traits on decision-making. In his case, decision-making often involves only selected advisors with a clear preference for direct leader-to-leader diplomacy instead of traditional bureaucratic channels (Immelman, 2017). This reduced the role of institutions and made Trump's personal preferences more dominant. To understand how Trump sees international events, Jervis's political psychology is useful. His low cognitive complexity and high distrust make him see the world in a simple way. He often divides countries into allies and enemies. The idea of being "predictably unpredictable" explains this behavior. His actions may seem inconsistent, but they follow a pattern based on short-term thinking and personal judgment. Özdamar et al. (2023) argue that he focuses on immediate gains that are visible at home. His policies are presented as successes for national interests even when they are unconventional and reactive. What he considers "positive" is usually reactive and different from traditional approaches. However, these decisions still remain consistent within his own belief system.

His thinking shapes how he takes risks. Trump's impulsiveness and confidence increase the chances of risky decisions, and his preference for personal style also influences how he handles diplomacy. Because of this, uncertainty became a normal feature of his foreign policy. Some analysts interpret this unpredictability as a deliberate strategy to gain advantage, while others see it as a reflection of deeper psychological tendencies (Bentley & Lerner, 2021).

Analyzing Trump's personality helps explain some aspects of his foreign policy behaviour. However, personality alone cannot explain everything. During his presidency, structural, institutional, and geopolitical factors also influenced U.S. foreign policy (Peterson, 2018). For this reason, Trump's foreign policy is best understood through the interaction of his personality and broader political and international factors.

Trump's case shows that a leadership personality can play an important role in foreign policy. Traits such as dominance, nationalism, distrust, and impulsiveness help explain the risks he took, the advisors he selected, and the way he processed information.

Although his foreign policy often appeared unpredictable, it was often consistent with his personality and decision-making style. At the same time, policy outcomes were also shaped by the political and diplomatic environment of the United States and by international developments.

### **Case Study 2: Vladimir Putin's Leadership Personality and Foreign Policy Decision Making**

Vladimir Putin's Leadership Personality and Foreign Policy Decision-Making: Putin is an example of extreme centralization and personalization of leadership characterized by particular attributes and is especially vivid during the Ukraine crisis. Analyses of his leadership often describe it as directive, somewhat authoritarian, and at times even Machiavellian. These features help explain how Putin is able to maintain his authority. At the same time, there is a clear effort to restore national pride and strengthen Russia's position in the international system. Traits such as intelligence, persistence, and self-confidence seem to play an important role here. His ability to connect with both political elites and the broader public also adds to his influence. Together, these factors make it easier for him to build support for a more revisionist foreign policy (Novruzov, 2024). In turn, this helps justify decisions that may involve high political, economic, or military costs. For example, interventions in Ukraine are presented as necessary. He argues they are needed to restore Russia's global position. These traits helped him stay in power after the Soviet Union collapsed. Research using Leadership Trait Analysis (LTA) shows that Putin has low cognitive complexity compared to many world leaders. This means he tends to see the world in a simple, black-and-white way. This low cognitive complexity is not just a personality trait. It also has real effects on foreign policy. Terkulova (2023) argues that Putin's personality traits, particularly his constricted black and white worldview, drove him to see the world in friend-enemy terms and to be willing to use military force to defend perceived threats, significantly shaping his decision to invade Ukraine in 2022. She argues that another leader in the same situation would have made a different decision. This shows that individual traits matter in this case. Snyder's Foreign Policy Decision Making (FPDM) framework helps explain how these traits operate within institutional structures. Research on Putin shows that he is the main

leader shaping Russia's foreign policy. He also represents Russia in international affairs. Hussain and Shakoor (2017) describe him as "the face of Russia's foreign policy" and "Russia's supreme leader" (Hussain & Shakoor, 2017, p – 1-25) They argue that his personality and ideology play a significant role in shaping Russia's position in world politics. His centralized leadership limits different viewpoints and reduces the role of advisors. Decision-making is limited to a small group. This makes it more likely that policies reflect his personal beliefs and strategies. This centralization also affects how perceptions are turned into actions. By studying his speeches toward the EU, US, China, Turkey, and the Middle East, they suggest that his views of other actors shape Russia's behavior. He sees some as hostile and others as cooperative. These perceptions influence Russia's foreign policy patterns. Within the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, this perspective views NATO expansion and Ukraine's independence as major policy issues. These are considered existential threats to Russia's security and influence.

Jervis's political psychology helps explain the thinking behind Putin's decision-making. Putin's centralized leadership affects how perceptions are turned into actions. Wulandari's analysis of the Russia-Ukraine war highlights the role of aggression, self-confidence, and authoritarian leadership. Wulandari states that Putin prefers a centralized and hierarchical way of thinking. This has played a significant role in increasing conflict. It also shows how a leader's personal traits can shape large-scale crises (Wulandari, 2025). When power is concentrated, fewer people give advice or disagree. This makes his aggressive and simple decision style more influential in risky decisions. Putin's personality helps explain many aspects of Russian foreign policy. However, other factors also matter. Russia's strategic culture, historical experiences, and desire to maintain its status as a major power influence how it sees threats and opportunities (Tsygankov, 2012). Waltz's Structural Realism also suggests that the international system creates opportunities and constraints for Russian foreign policy. Therefore, Russian foreign policy is best understood through a combination of personality, culture, and broader international factors.

The literature describes Putin as a leader with high self-confidence and a strong desire to control events. His style of governance gives him greater control over the political

system. As a result, foreign policy decisions often become more consistent and assertive. However, foreign policy outcomes are not shaped by leadership alone. They are also influenced by political, strategic, historical, and security factors. Putin's case shows how leadership personality and situational factors work together. This combination influences foreign policy behaviour. For this reason, Putin is an important case for studying the relationship between personality and foreign policy.

### **Case Study 3: Xi Jinping's Leadership Personality and Foreign Policy Decision Making**

Xi Jinping's foreign policy decision-making can be better understood by using Hermann's Leadership Trait Analysis (LTA), Snyder's Foreign Policy Decision Making (FPDM) framework, and Jervis's political psychology together. Rather than focusing only on the leader, this approach explains how personality, institutions, and perceptions interact to shape foreign policy decisions. Leadership Trait Analysis suggests that Xi focuses strongly on long-term goals. This can be seen in ideas such as the "Chinese Dream" and national rejuvenation. His attention is directed more towards long-term national objectives than short-term political concerns. As a result, China's foreign policy often appears more consistent and planned. Xi also places great importance on leadership in foreign affairs. This is reflected in his centralization of power and stronger control over policy direction. Because of this, China's foreign policy focuses on long-term development, great-power status, and national interests (Lida, 2020). Xi's strong focus on goals and his long-term ideological vision are linked to the centralization of power and the weakening of collective leadership. This concentration of power allows Xi to choose his advisors carefully. He can also control information and shape decision-making according to his preferences (Shirk, 2018; Lida, 2020). In FPDM terms, this shows a highly centralized decision-making system. Only a few people are involved, and different viewpoints are limited. This centralization has important effects on how advisors operate. Decision-making is limited to a small and loyal group. This reduces disagreement and makes it more likely that policies reflect Xi's personal views. As a result, advisory systems become less diverse. Cabestan (2017) argues that Xi introduced important institutional changes in China's foreign and security policy. Although many organizations are involved in decision-making, Xi strengthened his control over key

leadership bodies and policy coordination mechanisms. This reduced the influence of collective leadership. It also increased the authority of the top leader in foreign policy. As a result, China's foreign policy reflects Xi's preferences and long-term goals more than earlier periods. This became even more visible after Xi introduced further institutional reforms. Cabestan (2021) argues that Xi strengthened central foreign policy institutions to increase his control over foreign and security policy. Many important decisions are now coordinated through bodies that report directly to the top leadership. According to Snyder's FPDM, when power is concentrated and fewer alternative views are present, a leader's beliefs have a stronger influence on policymaking. This means that Xi's views play a greater role in shaping foreign policy decisions.

Jervis's political psychology helps explain how Xi understands international developments, since his ideological framework shapes how he sees both threats and opportunities. This is particularly important given China's global position. His focus on national rejuvenation and global leadership leads him to interpret external challenges as long-term strategic competition rather than short-term crisis (Douglas, 2017). This way of thinking gives structure and reduces uncertainty, but it can also narrow the range of policy options he considers. Xi's approach is careful and planned rather than impulsive, and his foreign policy decisions are not random but follow a broader strategic vision. Understanding Xi's personality helps explain some aspects of China's foreign policy. However, it cannot explain everything. Broader structural factors also play an important role. China's growing economic power, expanding global presence, and changing position in the international system have created new opportunities and challenges. Zhang (2015) argues that Xi has promoted a more proactive foreign policy focused on protecting China's interests while supporting continued national development. Therefore, China's foreign policy is shaped by both Xi's personality and China's broader role in global politics. The case of Xi highlights the important role of leadership in foreign policy. This is especially true in a highly centralized authoritarian system. When decision-making becomes more centralized, the leader's influence becomes more visible. As a result, China's foreign policy reflects Xi's preferences more clearly. However, foreign policy outcomes are not shaped by leadership alone.

Institutional frameworks, global developments, and national interests also play an important role. The case of Xi shows that foreign policy is influenced by both leadership personality and broader political structures.

### **Discussion of Findings**

This research paper examines the role of leadership personality in foreign policy decision-making, even within highly structured political systems. This study analyzes the individual differences between Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, and Xi Jinping and the effect of personality constructs, such as conceptual complexity, need for power, ideological conviction, and leadership style, and the way these personality traits influence leaders' perceptions of threats, information processing, and policy choices. The study shows that despite the importance of structural factors, a leader's personality does act as an important variable that influences the different aspects of foreign policy. One key finding of the study is that low conceptual complexity, along with high self-confidence and dominance, leads to more aggressive and risky foreign policy choices. This is especially true for Trump and Putin, while they are different in many ways. Trump's decision-making is impulsive and based on personal judgment. This leads to a view of international relations as two opposing sides. As a result, actions become unpredictable and unilateral. Putin has lower cognitive complexity and a more rigid worldview. He divides others into friends and enemies, which leads him to be more likely to use force. These results support Hermann's Leadership Trait Analysis. They show that low complexity and a strong belief in control lead to more aggressive foreign policy.

The study further observes that when authority is centralized, the leader's personality has a stronger impact on decision making. Power centralization, especially in the cases of Putin and Xi Jinping, reduces institutional constraints. It also limits the number of voices involved in decision making. At the same time, it helps control dissent and discourages people from speaking against authority. However, the results are different in Putin's case because of differences in personality and how he thinks about strategy. In his case, the centralized system strengthens his tendency to take risks. It is also linked to his preference for gaining status. This explains his willingness to take extreme and risky actions, such as the conflict in Ukraine. Unlike Xi, other leaders do not



centralize power in a strict way. They think more in the short term and use simple judgments. Their decisions are less planned. So, their foreign policy can look random and less ideological. This means centralization does not work the same for everyone. Its influence depends on the personality of the decision-maker. It also depends on the political situation. There are clear differences in the decision-making styles of the three leaders. Putin is often willing to take risks to achieve long-term goals. Trump's decisions are usually more personal and focused on short-term outcomes. Xi Jinping tends to take a more cautious and long-term approach. These differences help explain variations in the predictability and consistency of their foreign policies. By focusing on ideology, beliefs, and systems, the findings change how we understand foreign policy narratives and perceptions. Looking at individual leaders, Trump's ideology is flexible and based on deals. Putin's ideology is shaped by nationalism and security concerns. Xi's ideology is more structured and based on the Chinese Communist Party. Xi's focus on national rejuvenation and global influence shows how ideology can support foreign policy. It links domestic legitimacy with global goals. This matches what Robert Jervis says. He argues that a leader's beliefs and perceptions are very important for understanding how they see the world and respond to it. The study shows that personality and institutions work together. Traditional realists like Waltz focus on structure as the main factor that shapes state behavior. The analysis shows that democratic (Trump) and authoritarian (Putin and Xi) leaders in different institutional contexts show differing degrees of foreign policy behavioral outcomes resulting from variations in their personalities. Even in authoritarian systems, where institutional and structural factors are often expected to have a strong influence, leadership personality continues to shape how leaders perceive threats, process information, and make policy decisions. These findings suggest that political structures alone cannot explain differences in foreign policy. Leadership remains an important part of the explanation.

A leader's personality affects decisions and the whole decision-making process. It also influences who advises him, whose advice is heard, and how information is understood. For example, Trump's leadership led to weak and fragmented advisory systems, with poor flow of information. In Putin's system, centralization reduced the number of

advisors and strengthened his own beliefs. Similarly, Xi's system is also centralized. It has strong regulation of information flow, which supports his long-term strategic goals. These differences show that the decision-making system, the information used, and the ideas followed are largely shaped by a leader's personality.

This comparison shows that personality-driven foreign policy can lead to either unstable or predictable behavior, depending on the leader. Trump shows that strong personal traits can make foreign policy more unstable and inconsistent, which makes it harder to predict. Xi, on the other hand, follows discipline and a clear ideology, which makes his foreign policy more stable and consistent. Putin is in between. He combines long-term goals with risky methods. This shows that personality effects depend on the situation and on which traits are combined in a given context. From a broader perspective, the findings show that leadership personality is important in foreign policy. However, it should not be studied in isolation. It needs to be understood within broader political structures. This challenges the realist idea that leaders simply follow what the international system forces on them. Instead, values and beliefs also shape how leaders define national interests, understand threats, and choose policy options. In this sense, leaders are not only shaped by structure but also play an active role in shaping outcomes. The comparison highlights clear differences among the three leaders. Trump's leadership style is often impulsive and highly personalized. It is also marked by dominance, distrust, and low conceptual complexity. Putin's leadership is characterized by centralization, strong self-confidence, and a tendency to view international politics as a zero-sum competition. Xi Jinping's leadership is also highly centralized, but it is more focused on long-term planning and strategic goals. These differences show that leadership traits can shape foreign policy in different ways. However, outcomes do not depend only on individual characteristics. They are also influenced by the political situations leaders face.

Lastly, the study shows that foreign policy decision-making cannot be fully explained without considering leadership personalities. In the cases of Trump, Putin, and Xi Jinping, personal traits and institutional systems work together to shape different results ranging from unpredictable behavior to more calculated and ideological actions.

By combining political psychology and international relations, the study offers a more complete way of understanding foreign policy. It also helps balance the role of both structure and individual leadership in explaining state behavior.

The findings also have broader implications for foreign policy. The three cases show that leadership personality and structural factors are not opposing explanations. Instead, they work together. Leadership traits, institutions, strategic culture, and the international environment all influence foreign policy outcomes. The role of personality becomes stronger when power is concentrated, and institutions allow greater flexibility. For this reason, personality should not replace structural explanations. Rather, it helps explain how leaders perceive and interpret different domestic and international situations.

### **Conclusion**

This research examined the impact of leadership personality on foreign policy decision-making through a comparative analysis of Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, and Xi Jinping. The findings show that individual traits play a major role in shaping how leaders understand and respond to international issues. While structural and institutional factors do not lose significance, they do not fully explain foreign policy behavior. Instead, leadership personality emerges as a key but often overlooked factor that helps explain differences in foreign policy outcomes even within the same international context.

The analysis reveals clear differences in the leadership styles of the three leaders. Trump's style is more impulsive and less complex. This often makes his foreign policy appear unpredictable and inconsistent. Putin follows a more controlled approach and is generally more willing to take risks to achieve strategic goals. Xi's style is more strategic and influenced by ideology. He places strong emphasis on long-term planning, China's rise, and national rejuvenation. These differences affect how the three leaders process information, choose advisors, and set foreign policy priorities.

More broadly, this research highlights the importance of political psychology in International Relations. Studying structures and institutions alone is not enough. It is also important to understand the beliefs, perceptions, and personalities of leaders. The findings show that foreign policy outcomes are shaped by the interaction of leadership

traits, institutions, and international conditions. By comparing Trump, Putin, and Xi Jinping, this study demonstrates how leadership personality helps explain differences in foreign policy choices.

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## Ambedkar's Constitution and The Question of Lived Experience in India: An Analysis <sup>1</sup>

Imran Khan <sup>2</sup>

India celebrated its 76<sup>th</sup> National Constitution Day on 26<sup>th</sup> November 2025. The Constitution of India has the distinction of being the lengthiest constitution of the world, currently having 448 articles, 25 parts and 12 schedules. The document contained, among other things, details of the Fundamental Rights and Fundamental Duties, Directive Principles of State Policy, working of the Legislature, Executive and Judiciary, both at the Union and the State level, etc. This detailed framework given in the constitution is one of the major reasons why, unlike many of the Third World countries, India never witnessed military rule since its independence in 1947. Despite these achievements, Indian society continued to be ridden by casteism, communalism, gender and class discrimination, etc. B.R. Ambedkar, writing back in 1945, argued that the future constitution of India should ensure to all its citizens the right to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness. This can be possible only when the constitution aims at establishing social and economic democracy based on the lived experience of the people of India, particularly the Scheduled Castes and the minorities. This work aims at exploring how Ambedkar tried to address the everyday social problems in India by proposing several provisions for inculcating in the constitution of independent India, many of which were not ratified by the Constituent Assembly.

**Keywords:** B. R. Ambedkar, constitutional morality, lived experience, minorities, scheduled castes.

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The Indian Constitution has a distinction of being the lengthiest written constitution in the world, currently having 448 articles, divided into 25 Parts and 12 Schedules. The constitution makers took 2 years, 11 months and 18 days to complete this lengthy document. The Constituent Assembly formally adopted the Constitution of India on 26<sup>th</sup> November, 1949, which, even today, is celebrated as the National Constitution Day, although it was enforced on 26<sup>th</sup> January, 1950. One of the major reasons behind India's successful journey as a democratic country lies in the fact that its constitution has provided clear guidelines regarding the functioning of the government and that it is impossible for any branch of government or any institution to go beyond its limits. This is why, unlike many of the Third World countries which attained independence during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, India never witnessed any kind of mass insurgency or military coup since its independence in 1947. Except a brief period of national emergency between 1975-77, elections in India have taken place on regular basis at the national, state and local level. All these are the clear evidences of the success of Indian democracy at the political level. However, the question remains whether the democracy can be reduced to voting and elections? What about the millions of people in India who are discriminated because of their caste, religion, gender, language, region, etc. in their everyday life? Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was the founder of All India Scheduled Castes Federation (AISCF) and later on became the Chairperson of the Drafting Committee of the Constituent Assembly of India. On behalf of the AISCF, he drafted a memorandum in 1945 and submitted to the Constituent Assembly. He published this memorandum with the title *State and Minorities: What are their Rights and how to Secure them in the Constitution of Free India* in 1947. In this memorandum, he advocated the idea that the independent Indian state shall ensure to all its subjects the right to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness. Unlike John Locke who advocated for the right to life, liberty and property, Ambedkar knew that the majority of the masses in India either have no or very small amount of property. Through this phrase, Ambedkar wanted to add a qualitative dimension to the rights of the citizens based on their lived experience. This qualitative dimension, for Ambedkar, shall be the guiding



principle for the branches of government in independent India. Most of the works on Ambedkar's idea of democracy revolves around either his ideas of social justice or his views on destruction of the caste system. However, there is hardly any work available which attempts to show how Ambedkar tried to broaden the scope of democracy by addressing the everyday problems of the society based on the lived experience of the majority of the people in India, particularly the Scheduled Castes and the minorities and this is the gap this paper intends to fill. The author has mainly relied on the content analysis of the primary sources, i.e., books and other documents written or prepared by Ambedkar himself as well as secondary sources which include books and journal articles written on Ambedkarite ideas and concepts for writing this research paper. It must be pointed out here that Ambedkar used the term 'United State of India' in the Memorandum of 1945. Also, Ambedkar, on many occasions, used the term 'depressed classes' to collectively refer to the minorities and the Scheduled Castes. Therefore, in this paper, the author shall also use these terms in a similar sense as it was used by Ambedkar.

### **Understanding Lived Experience**

Before going into the details of Ambedkar's idea of everyday democracy, it is necessary to understand the idea of lived experience. The concept of lived experience is particularly a matter of debate among phenomenologists who try to study a phenomenon as they appear or are experienced in conscious awareness from a first-person perspective without relying on external explanations or preconceived theories about the real world. As Edmund Husserl (1997, p. 144)., widely considered to be the father of phenomenology, has pointed out,

Perception is not some empty 'having' of perceived things, but rather a flowing lived experience of subjective appearances synthetically uniting themselves in a consciousness of the self-same entity existing in this way or that" (1997, p. 144).

It is very much clear from the above quotation that phenomenologists give priority to the firsthand lived experiences, as against the practise of theorisation and

generalisation based on empirical data. Here, the idea of lived experience needs to be distinguished from experience. Sundar Sarukkai (Sarukkai, 2017, p. 36) an Ambedkarite philosopher, has provided an insightful contrast between the two. According to him, experience has mainly three distinct qualities. Firstly, all experiences can be replicated in terms of its materiality since there is no necessary connection between the experiencer and the experience. Secondly, the experiencer decides whether to be a part of an experience or not according to his/her own will. Thirdly, the experiencer can even modify his/her experience as per his/her requirements (2017, p. 34-35). Lived experience, on the other hand, does not possess any of these qualities. That is, neither the subject has a choice nor the capacity to leave or modify the experience, even if it is displeasing for him/her. There lies an indestructible relationship between the experiencer and the content of the experience. As Sarukkai has pointed out,

Lived experience is not about what there is but is about what there is not. Lived experience is not about the freedom of experience but about the lack of freedom in an experience (2017, p. 36).

Ambedkar tried to address the problems concerning the lived experience in the Indian society. It must be pointed out here that Ambedkar, in his works, primarily dealt with the lived experience of the minorities and the Scheduled Castes. One possible explanation behind this could be that the context in which Ambedkar wrote most of his works in the 1930s and 1940s when the politics in British India was mainly revolving around the question of representation of the Scheduled Castes and the minorities. He always wanted the separate electorate for the minorities and the Scheduled Castes. The Indian National Congress (from now, the Congress party), under Mahatma Gandhi, had no objection for separate electorate to the religious minorities but opposed strongly when Ambedkar wanted the same for the Scheduled Castes. This dispute finally culminated in the Poona Pact of 1932 in which Ambedkar had to give up his demand and settle for reserved seats for the Scheduled Castes. When he drafted the memorandum on behalf of the AISC, he proposed a number of safeguards for both these communities and tried to create a democratic space for all India by means of law.

## Ambedkar on the Representation of Minorities

Ambedkar's primary concern for the minorities and the Scheduled Castes was to ensure their representation. As Shanum Tejani has pointed out, "For Ambedkar, the protection of the minority was the crux of how democracy could work in India, and how a set of shared political values could develop" (Tejani, 2013, p. 113). Rather than taking the population of different communities and deciding who constitutes the minorities in India, Ambedkar gave insightful criteria for a community to be considered a minority: (i) a community needs to be conscious about its distinct and discriminatory relationship with the majority community; (ii) the Constitution should guarantee equal civic rights, adult franchise, freedom of religion and prohibition of civic disabilities; (iii) any minority community willing to live under the constitutional order similar to that of the majority, should have guaranteed legal protection against discrimination by the majority and (iv) any vulnerable minority community shall have a special political representation, be in the form of reservation or the separate electorate (Chatterjee, 2018, p. 91). Following these criteria, Ambedkar argued that the untouchables are qualified for being treated as minorities while, small but wealthy and powerful communities are not entitled to claim the minority status. In other words, Ambedkar emphasised on the lived experience of different communities for being designated as a minority.

In Article II – Section III of *State and Minorities*, Ambedkar held that while the representatives of different minorities in the Cabinet shall be elected by members of each community in the Legislature by single transferable vote, the representatives of majority community in the Executive shall be elected by the whole House by single transferable vote (2021, p. 20). This clause was mainly aimed at ensuring that the majority shall neither have exclusive control over the government nor upon the legislature. In addition, an officer called the Superintendent of Minority Affairs, who shall be responsible for preparing an annual report on the treatment of minorities by the public as well as by the government, both Union and the State. This report shall be placed for discussion before the legislature, Union or the State (Ambedkar, 2021, p. 20–21). For the Scheduled Castes, Ambedkar argued that they shall have minimum

representation in the legislature and the executive. At the same time, efforts should be made to reduce the communal majority to reasonable dimensions should be carved out from the share of the majority and redistributed among all minority communities in inverse proportion to their economic position, social status and educational advancement. There shall be no representation of special interests (Ambedkar, 2021, p. 23). Ambedkar was also very critical of the system of nomination by the executive of the representatives from the minority communities. Without franchise rights, for Ambedkar, it is impossible to develop political consciousness among the vulnerable minorities. He, therefore, vehemently advocated the introduction of universal adult franchise. When questioned about the level of political consciousness of the masses in India by the Simon Commission in 1928, Ambedkar replied that the depressed classes shall exercise their franchise right in the most intelligent manner since they have experienced untouchability in each and every minute of their life from thousands of years and they are now aware that they are now conscious that gaining political power is the only solution to this problem (Chatterjee, 2018, p. 93). Ambedkar was also critical of the electoral arrangement brought about by the Poona Pact of 1932 on three grounds. Firstly, the proportion of representation of the Scheduled Castes had been fixed only after the share of the other communities had been taken out. Secondly, the weightage of representation of the Scheduled Castes had been fixed only after the weightage of the other communities had been allotted. Thirdly, the Scheduled Castes had been allotted seats only after seats had been allocated to special interests (Ambedkar, 2021, p. 51).

Ambedkar was of the view that what the minorities and the Scheduled Castes need is not just representation but effective representation, which is not possible through representation in proportion to their population. Proportional representation, according to Ambedkar, might be effective only where the minority population is large enough to secure its representation. However, this may not work in our country. In India, the quantum of representation of the majority needs to be reduced and distributed among the minorities on some intelligible principles so that the majority do not turn into

communal majority. Also, India has a huge diversity among the minorities as well. This is the reason why Ambedkar, even after signing the Poona Pact, remained a strong advocate of separate electorate for the Scheduled Castes in principle. For him, the basis for the allocation of separate electorate is not the difference of religion or culture but the social relationship between the majority and the minorities which is marked by social discrimination. But he stopped advocating this after the partition of the country. Ambedkar was very much concerned with the representation of the minorities and the Scheduled Castes. Criticising the conventional idea of political democracy, Ambedkar wanted to emphasise that a crucial tenet of democracy is the equality of participation and representation. But since caste and religious considerations are very strong in India, this can be achieved only by its imposition through Constitution and the law. This positive discrimination is necessary to protect the marginalised groups from the communal majority.

Ambedkar was also the staunch supporter of the linguistic reorganisation of the states which will better safeguard the linguistic minorities. He was of the view that this would create a kind of social homogeneity which in turn would make democracy work in a better manner. According to him, linguistic states would “make easy the way to democracy and to remove racial and cultural tension” (2017, p. 144-145). Citing examples of animosity between Gujaratis and Maharashtrians in Bombay and Tamils and Andhras in Madras, Ambedkar argued that multilingual states existed in India unnaturally and therefore, led to discrimination and partiality of one group at the hands of another group. Although he advocated for linguistically homogenous states even if that requires population transfer, Ambedkar was well aware of the fact that there will remain some kind of minorities in every state whose rights need to be safeguarded. He gave a couple of suggestions for this. Firstly, he argued that Indian union should have smaller states or administrative units. He had suggested to divide Uttar Pradesh, the largest state in India even today, into four states so that the administration shall run smoothly. For Ambedkar, in smaller states, the size of majority shall not be very large in relation to the minorities. Secondly, the Constitution shall ensure the representation

of the minorities in the legislature through reservation which shall be their biggest safeguard (Ambedkar, 2017, p. 168-169). This idea of linguistic reorganisation was later on recommended by the States Reorganisation Commission led by Justice Fazal Ali in 1956 but with some modifications. The Commission accepted that language should be the primary criteria for states reorganisation. This led to the abolition of the four-fold classification of the states under the original constitution. At the same time, the Commission tried to strike a balance between the language-based reorganisation of states on the one hand and the need for administrative efficiency, economic viability and national integration on the other hand. The Commission, however, refused to accept the idea of “one state one language” formula or the creation of linguistically homogenous state through population transfer. Most of the recommendations of the Commission were ratified by the 7<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act of 1956.

### **Ambedkar on Socio-Economic Safeguards of the Minorities and the Scheduled Castes**

Ambedkar was aware of the fact that only political representation will not be able to bring democracy in everyday life of the people of India. In addition to representation, the minorities and the Scheduled Castes need to acquire self-respect in society. He held that the government – both Union and the State – shall bear the financial responsibility of the education of the Scheduled Castes. This responsibility shall form the foremost priority while framing the Education Budget of both the Union and the State governments (2021, p.26-27). This demand was a part of the Clause 9 of the Poona Pact which guaranteed that an adequate amount shall be earmarked for the education of the Scheduled Castes. Ambedkar was also concerned about the economic exploitation of the minorities and the Scheduled Castes. He was highly critical of the two dominant strands of economic models, i.e., capitalism and socialism. Both these models, according to Ambedkar, were insufficient for addressing the problems of the depressed classes in India. He argues that a liberal democracy rests mainly on the premise that the individual is an end in himself having some inalienable rights. Neither the individual shall surrender any of his rights in lieu of any kind of privilege by the state nor the state shall delegate powers to private individuals to govern others

(2021, p.37-38). Ambedkar was of the view that the capitalist economic model undermines at least the last two ideals of liberal democracy. For him, those who are unemployed and live a life of continuous fear of losing a decent and respectful life are compelled to relinquish their Fundamental Rights for the sake of subsistence. Moreover, the supporters of capitalism argue for a minimal state intervention in the economic sphere which will maximise the liberty of the individual. But this liberty, Ambedkar believed, only belonged to the capitalist class who enjoy the liberty to increase the working hours and reduce the rate of wages. Therefore, wherever the state's refusal to intervene in the economic sphere leads to, what Ambedkar called, the "dictatorship of the private employer" (2021, p.38-39). Recently, Gopal Guru has also argued that the liberal democracy in India has somewhat failed to provide the language of self-esteem and self-respect for the Dalits (2011, p. 101). Regarding socialism, Ambedkar was strongly against the economic interpretation of history. He argued that, unlike Europe, property is not the only source of power in the Indian society. Religion, customs, traditions and particularly caste in the Indian context plays a vital in deciding the social authority. Ambedkar argued that most of the socialists and the Communists have mistakenly treated caste as a primordial identity which can be resolved by addressing the class related issues. Critiquing the famous base-superstructure metaphor, Ambedkar wrote,

The base is not the building. On the basis of economic relations, a building is erected of religious, social and political institutions. This building has just as much reality as the base. If we want to change the base, then first the building that has been constructed on it has to be knocked down. In the same way, if we want to change the economic relations of society, then first the existing social, political and other institutions will have to be destroyed" (Ambedkar, as cited in Omvedt, 2008, p. 83).

Ambedkar even held that, firstly, it is futile to think that the entire proletariat population in India shall come together and launch a revolution and, even if they do so then the socialists have to deal with the caste question once they are in power because caste system is not simply a division of labour, "*it is the division of labourers*" (Ambedkar,

2022, p. 20, *original*). As against both these models, Ambedkar came up with his own idea of state socialism. In Article II Section II Clause 4 of *State and Minorities*, Ambedkar proposed that the key industries shall be owned by the state. Those which are not the key industries but are basic industries shall be owned by the state and run either by the state directly or by the corporations established by the state. The state shall make it compulsory for every adult citizen to buy a life insurance policy appropriate according to his wages. The agriculture should be treated as the state-owned industry which shall divide the agricultural land into standard size farms and let out those farms to the group of families in villages. The farm shall be cultivated as a collective farm and the share shall be distributed among the tenants as per the directions issued by the government after the payment of charges properly leviable on the farm (Ambedkar, 2021, p. 18-19). The state shall allocate the land without distinction of caste or creed and there shall be no landlord. The state shall bear the expenditure of collective farms by the supply of water, manure, seeds, etc. In return, the state shall be entitled to receive a portion for land revenue, a portion to pay the debenture-holders and a portion to pay for the use of capital good supplied (Ambedkar, 2021, p. 18-19). Another proposal laid down by Ambedkar in the Memorandum of 1945 was related to New Land Settlements. As he wrote:

A perpetual war is going on every day in every village between the Hindus and the Untouchables.... It is a contest between the Hindus who are economically and socially strong and the Untouchables who are economically poor and numerically small.... But the chief weapon in the armoury of the Hindus is economic power which they possess over the poor Untouchables living in the village" (2021, p. 61).

Ambedkar, therefore, proposed for the establishment of a Settlement Commission which shall hold uncultivated lands belonging to the State in trust for Settlement of the Scheduled Castes in different villages (2021, p. 27). The Union government shall allot a budget of Rs. 5 crores for the Commission which shall have the power to purchase any land offered for sale and use it for the said scheme of settlement. For Ambedkar, these schemes were important because in Indian villages where



agriculture is the primary occupation, most of the untouchables are landless labourers who are dependent upon the upper caste Hindus for employment. The scheme will free the landless untouchables from the clutches of the landlords who, in most cases, come from the upper castes. In addition to these, Ambedkar was also concerned about the welfare of the people. He argued that certain facilities, like roads, transportation, law and order, etc. which are required, not by any particular individual, but the society at large. Therefore, the government should ensure these facilities for the citizens of its country, rather than letting the private players to provide these facilities. Welfare measures implemented through the use of public funds should not be simply a low-level public spending but must involve an intelligent and faithful use of every penny which can bring most benefit. He was of the view that a particular type of economic policy may lead to rapid growth while the same policy can prove to be a disaster in another context. Accordingly, public expenditure should strike a balance between specific objectives and available resources on the one hand and ensuring economy, efficiency and effectiveness in governance. While the government tries to fulfil the democratic demands of the people through its welfare policies, the allocation of the total amount for every democratic demand should be based on the economic wisdom and intelligent use of public fund (Ambirajan, 1999, p. 3283). This idea of welfarism is quite significant because rather than focusing on giving short term benefits or 'freebies', Ambedkar wanted to provide long term welfare to the people, particularly to the depressed classes. A careful application of these ideas can also reduce the fiscal deficit in contemporary India.

### **Ambedkar and the Idea of Constitutional Morality**

After discussing elaborately on the question of political representation and socio-economic safeguards of the minorities and the Scheduled Castes, Ambedkar made it clear that the Constitution could only provide a legal framework but could not develop sentiments and attitudes which are essential for bringing about social change in India. In order to be effective in the everyday affairs of the citizens,

constitutional laws need strong foundation of constitutional morality. As he himself pointed out during the Constituent Assembly Debate

Constituent Morality is not a natural sentiment. It has to be cultivated. We must realise our people are yet to learn it. Democracy in India is only a top-dressing on an Indian soil, which is essentially undemocratic" (Ambedkar, as cited in Béteille, 2008, p. 36).

Ambedkar was highly sceptical about the undemocratic nature of the Indian society which, according to him, is the society of castes and communities. This is the reason why Ambedkar was in favour of a lengthy constitution having details on every possible aspect since India lacks democratic values at the socio-economic level. If one looks at the survival and working of the Indian Constitution in the last more than seven decades, he/she may argue that Ambedkar's scepticism has proved to be incorrect because India has successfully managed to safeguard its fabric of democracy since 1947. Although this is true, if we go deeper into the democratic practices in India, one can easily find that the success of Indian democracy lies in the populist strategies, and not in the constitutional values. Despite the fact that the populist leaders and the parties do not directly deny the constitutional procedures, they often try to override them in the name of the interest of 'the people'. Ambedkar was against this kind of politics of mobilisation after the enforcement of the Constitution since he had expected that in the absence of the democratic tradition rooted in the rule of law, populism shall triumph constitutional values. He explained his position in the following words:

It means that we must abandon the method of civil disobedience, non-cooperation and satyagraha. When there was no way left for constitutional methods for economic and social objectives, there was a great deal of justification for unconstitutional methods. But where constitutional methods are open, there can be no justification for these unconstitutional methods" (quoted in Béteille, 2008, p. 38).

Ambedkar had hoped that after the enforcement of the Constitution, the citizens of India shall learn constitutional morality, which has perhaps remained a far dream

even today. Democracy in India, in a way, has strengthened collective identities, which M.N. Srinivas has called 'horizontal mobilisation' of castes and communities (1962, p. 15). It must be pointed out here that Ambedkar was not against any kind of protest or civil disobedience movement. He wanted to emphasise on the transition from colonial rule to self-rule in the context of which the politics of protest or civil disobedience needs to be reshaped. Ambedkar argued that while during the colonial rule, people had limited scope to influence the rulers, after independence the means of being heard by the ruler are now available. For him, when constitutional means are available, extra-constitutional methods are no longer required. Moreover, according to Andre Béteille (2008, p. 41), the civil disobedience cannot be just about disobedience, it is also about civility. As he wrote,

The virtue of civility is an important component of constitutional morality. It calls for tolerance, restraint and mutual accommodation in public life. Civility is a moderating influence which acts against the extremes of ideological politics. It restrains the exercise of power by the powerful and restrains obstruction and violence by those who do not have power but who wish to have it" (Béteille, 2008, p. 42).

Ambedkar warned against the degeneration of this civility which will lead to anarchy. This morality is important in order to bring fraternity among the people without which, according to Ambedkar, democracy in India will never succeed. As he said in the Constituent Assembly in 1949,

Without equality, liberty would produce the supremacy of the few over the many. Equality without liberty would kill individual initiative. Without fraternity, liberty and equality could not become a natural course of things" (Ambedkar, as cited in Dréze, 2018, p. 126).

Ambedkar was well aware of the fact that the biggest problem for the depressed classes in India is the social isolationism forced upon them by the upper castes. This kind of social isolationism means "social segregation, social humiliation, social discrimination and social injustice" (quoted in Kapoor and Bhagavan, p. 135). Ambedkar argued that in order to come out of this social isolationism, the

minorities and the Dalits must develop a sense of kinship or fraternity to the extent that they could be treated as parts of the common whole. Ambedkar considered constitutional morality as the means to achieve this fraternity which is completely devoid of the spirit of caste. At this point, Ambedkar was highly influenced by his mentor John Dewey's idea of 'social endosmosis'. For Dewey, social endosmosis refers to shattering the hierarchy between the elites and the underprivileged. Ambedkar, taking cue from Dewey's notion, held that such kind of social fluidity can bring harmony to both political and everyday life (Stroud, 2023, p. 148).

### Conclusion:

It must be pointed out here that Ambedkar's views on constitution and lived experience is not free from shortcomings. His views on minorities excluded the major chunk of the exploited masses, particularly the women. Though a strong advocate of women empowerment, one hardly finds any reference to the lived experience of being a woman. In addition, Ambedkar who is known for his rational and scientific arguments relied on the idealist notion of morality for achieving fraternity which is, for him, the basis of democracy. This moral basis may not have that kind of an appeal on the masses as against any populist policy which is capable of giving immediate benefit to him or her, be it a cash transfer scheme or any other kind of freebie. In fact, these freebies have created, what Ernesto Laclau (2005, p. 155) has called, *logics of difference* which has helped several governments across the globe to sustain power and pacify the anti-incumbency wave against them. Moreover, Ambedkar's recommendation for linguistically homogenous states or administrative units through large-scale population transfer does not sound feasible in a diverse country like India where hundreds or, perhaps, thousands of languages are spoken within every state. Despite these critical arguments, one should not overlook the fact that it was Ambedkar who was, perhaps, the first person in the Constituent Assembly to focus on the lived experience of the people of India. He not only broadened the idea of democracy but also advocated that marginalised groups should get a better share and respect in this democratic set

up. He was well aware of the fact that the idea of democracy as the “government of the people, by the people, for the people”, is not going to bring any significant change in the lives of the vulnerable masses of India. For Ambedkar, democracy was not just a form of government but a style of associated living based on mutual reverence, sympathy and cooperation towards fellow citizens. His emphasis on minority rights and representation, socio-economic safeguards for the marginalised groups and constitutional morality were the means through which he wanted to achieve these objectives. These conditions are necessary for the pursuit of happiness by all, particularly by the minorities and the Scheduled Castes. He did manage to include some of the ideas in the Part IV of the Constitution, i.e., in the Directive Principles of State Policy. But since these principles are not legally enforceable, their scope has remained limited. Thus, it can be said that Ambedkar wanted to bring a kind of a constitution and constitutional values in India which will govern the day-to-day affairs of its people.

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## Investigating the Relationship Between Personality Traits, Coping Styles and Stress Among College Students in Singur, West Bengal <sup>1</sup>

Sreeparna Kar <sup>2</sup> 

The study investigates the relationship between personality traits, coping styles and stress among college students in Singur, West-Bengal. Utilizing the Big Five Inventory to assess personality dimensions—Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism—the research aims to unravel the patterns that inform both theoretical understanding and practical applications. A sample of 255 college students participated by completing an online survey. Participants completed the General Health Questionnaire-12, the Proactive Coping Inventory, and the Big Five Inventory. Results showed significant positive correlations between personality dimensions (openness, extraversion, agreeableness and conscientiousness) and coping styles (proactive, reflective, strategic planning, preventive coping). A Significant positive correlation was observed between extraversion and openness with instrumental support. Neuroticism was negatively correlated with proactive, reflective, strategic planning, preventive and instrumental support coping styles. Logistic regression result reveals neuroticism as a risk factor for stress whereas proactive and emotional support seeking coping style as protective factors for stress. The findings suggest that personality traits are intricately associated with coping behaviours, and both personality dimensions and coping styles work as determiners of stress emphasizing the importance of tailored psychological interventions to enhance coping mechanisms and develop adaptive coping styles.

**Keywords:** personality traits, coping styles, stress, college students

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Selye (1957) has defined stress as "any external event or any internal drive which threaten to upset the organism equilibrium is stress". It is an overwhelming condition or feeling experienced by a person who perceives that the demands or situations exceed the personal and social resources the individual is able to mobilize. Psychological stress is believed to contribute to the initiation and maintenance of a wide range of mental and physical and emotional conditions. As the era of globalization has brought us tremendous social, economic and technological progress, but it has set forth a whole range of psychological pressures so much so that psychological stress has become a part of our everyday life. Although stress being an inevitable part of our lives still differences has been observed between individuals as to how they experience stress and deal with them which in turn affect their mental and physical conditions. In this context the role of personality traits and coping has gained tremendous importance in studying stress among individuals. Every individual goes through unique situations and psychological experiences during different stages of life which shapes their individual traits which in turn process the way they perceive, think and behave (Lyrakos, 2011). On the basis of this every individual develop novel ways of experiencing events of emotional expression and personality traits (Cherry, 2018). Overtime, these behaviours and traits develop into identities that individuals hold. Personality plays a pivotal role in the formation of individual identity. Personality shapes thought, feeling and behaviour and in turn that becomes unique to an individual (Cloninger, 2008). On the other hand, coping refers to the strategies and behaviours that individuals use to manage stress, difficult situations, or emotions. It involves both cognitive and behavioural efforts to handle internal and external demands which are recognized as taxing or exceeding a person's resources.

According to the transactional models, stress is perceived as a process and the interpretation or appraisal of stressful events is more important than the actual events (Lazarus & Launier, 1978; Cohen & Lazarus, 1983). It takes into consideration three components, the event (stressor), the person's response (signs and symptoms of stress) and interfering factors such as personality traits, where in a stressful situation



an individual is seen as an active element as to how he uses his faculties that affect the strategies of coping with stressors (Folkman, 2013). The transactional model puts forward a psychological framework that explains how individuals perceive and respond to stressors in their environment. This model posits that stress arises not merely from external events but from the interactions between individuals and their surroundings. Central to the model is the process of appraisal, where individuals evaluate whether a situation is a threat or a challenge based on their available resources. Primary appraisal involves determining if an event is harmful, while secondary appraisal assesses one's ability to cope with the perceived threat. Drawing inferences from the transactional model it can be said that how an individual will perceive a particular situation depends how he perceives the situation and also on the coping strategies he uses. As individual differences exist in using specific coping strategies by individuals, it is seen that they are a result of individual's personality traits. Coping strategies are classified into two main types: problem-focused coping, which seeks to address the stressor directly, and emotion-focused coping, which aims to alleviate distress. The model recognizes that coping responses may evolve over time as individuals reappraise their situations, highlighting the dynamic nature of stress management. Ultimately, the transactional model illustrates how cognitive evaluations shape emotional responses and influence behaviour.

Researches have documented the contribution of personality traits in predicting stress level (Akter, Sultana & Akter, 2020; Chai & Low 2015; Liong & Yeoh 2011) and certain maladaptive personality traits (e.g., neuroticism) have frequently been linked with stressful life events which in turn makes them vulnerable to experience negative emotions (Akter, Sultana & Akter 2020). Whereas individuals possessing adaptive personality traits were relatively less influenced by stress (Nicandro et al., 2023). Also, the association between personality dimensions and coping strategies is a long-standing area under investigation (O'Brien & DeLongis 1996; Holahan et al., 2005; Penley & Tomaka, 2002; Watson & Hubbard, 1996; Lee-Baggley, Preece & DeLongis, 2005; Connor-Smith & Flaschbart, 2007). Researches have well asserted that personality

traits predict coping style (Karimzade & Besharat 2011) and also affect the way we adopt coping styles (John & Srivastava 1999). Coping is thus an active process resulting as a response to demands made by the situation and how we evaluate them. Coping strategies are most predominantly classified as problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and avoidant coping. Problem-focused coping is defined as an adaptive, proactive strategy employed to manage stress by addressing it directly or altering it or by eliminating the origin of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) whereas emotion-focused coping is a technique directed at lowering emotional response (such as anxiety, fear etc) connected with the stressor (Admiraal, Korthagen, Wubbels, 2000; Folkman & Lazarus 1980). Not all strategies of emotion-focused coping are maladaptive, adaptive forms are like seeking support and accepting responsibility (David & Suls 1999; O'Brien & DeLongis, 1996). Third most predominant coping style is avoidant coping which is referred to as changing one's behaviour as an effort to minimize, deny, ignore or evade stressful events (Holahan, 2005).

There is a dearth of studies depicting significant association of adaptive personality traits with active coping styles (Penley & Tomaka, 2002; Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007) and association of maladaptive personality traits with avoidance coping (Penley & Tomaka, 2002) with some studies showing some inconsistencies among these findings where significant relation between some of the personality traits and coping strategies has not been depicted (Hooker, Frazier, Monahan, 1994; David & Suls, 1999; O'Brien & DeLongis, 1996). Furthermore, there is scarcity of studies done in Indian context specially with respect with college students which pictures a transition stage. Transitioning to college presents a myriad of challenges for individuals, from academic demands to social integration, necessitating effective coping strategies to maintain well-being. So, in this study an attempt has been made to explore the relationship between personality dimensions, coping styles and stress among college students in Singur region of West Bengal.

## **Defining the variables**

### **Personality**

Personality is generally defined as a unique and relatively stable set of characteristics, traits, and patterns of behaviour and thought that define an individual's distinctive way of interacting with the world. It includes aspects such as temperament, attitudes, values, ideals and habits, and is shaped by both genetic and environmental factors. Personality ascertains how a person responds to various situations and the way they relate to others.

### **Coping style**

Coping typically involves two components, appraisal and coping (Lazarus, 1966). Appraisal involves perceiving a stressor and then analysing one's ability to deal with the stressor.

### **Stress**

Stress is the body's natural physical, mental, or emotional reaction to changes, challenges, or perceived threats. It is a systemic response triggered by a stimulus (stressor) that alters homeostasis, often causing the release of hormones that produce a "fight-or-flight" response, such as increased heart rate and muscle tension. Stress, defined as a state of apprehension or anxiety caused by a challenging situation. Stress is a natural human response prompting individuals to address challenges and threats in our lives.

### **Objective of the study**

The study aims to investigate the relationship between personality traits, coping styles as well as to explore the factors (personality dimensions and coping styles) that predict stress among college students. In addition, the study also analyses gender differences in coping styles. By exploring these variables, we aim to offer insights that can acquaint our theoretical understanding and practical applications. Ultimately, our goal is to contribute to a deeper comprehension of how inherent personality characteristics influence coping behaviours, and in what ways these factors are related to stress

thereby aiding in the evolution of effective strategies to support students in navigating the complexities of college life.

The specific research questions were

- (1) To explore the association between personality traits and coping styles among college students.
- (2) What are the significant predictors of stress (personality dimensions and coping styles) for college students?
- (3) To explore if there is exists any difference among males and females regarding coping styles.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants and procedure**

Cross-sectional study was carried out from March 2023 to July 2023. As data collection was done in online mode convenience sampling method was followed keeping in mind the limitations that this sampling method brings along with it. Data was collected through questionnaire. Participants consisted of (255) college students (male = 153; female = 102) selected from different colleges in Singur, West Bengal. Assurance was provided to the participants about maintaining the confidentiality of the information. The participants were well informed before-hand about the purpose of the research and they had voluntarily agreed to be a part of the study thereby providing an informed consent. The participants were also told that they are free to withdraw from the study anytime if they wished to. Nearly 20-25 minutes was required for each participant to answer the questionnaire. Participants falling under the below stated criteria were only included in the study – (1) unmarried and falling between age of 18 – 21 years (mean-19.5 years), (2) staying with their biological parents. Whereas, participants falling under the following criteria were eliminated from the study – (1) participants living in hostel or with any relatives, (2) Participants with history of significant physical, psychological or neurological condition or with mental retardation, epilepsy or head injury (3) Participants having parents separated, divorced, staying away from home due to

occupation or have lost one of the parent, (4) Participants with previous history of abuse, neglect. These exclusion criteria were established so as to maintain homogeneity of the sample and to ensure that there were no past incidents or chronic life situations in particular that would contribute to heightened levels of stress in the participant. We had approached 282 participants, out of which 268 met all the inclusion and exclusion criteria and among that 255 of the participants had fully completed the questionnaire set.

This survey design was followed by collecting data through self-administering questionnaires.

### **Tools used**

Data was collected by administering three different instruments along-with a socio-demographic data sheet. These are as follows:

*Socio Demographic Form:* Personal information included participant's name, gender, age, educational qualification, as well as information regarding educational qualification of parents and number of siblings. Participants were assured that their personal information would be handled with confidentiality and all information would be used only as research purpose.

*General Health Questionnaire-12* (Goldberg G.H.Q-12) this questionnaire is widely used and validated to screen for high psychological stress and morbidity. the questionnaire was scored morbidity using bimodal scoring method (0-0-1-1). Generally, a cut of 4 is considered to categorize individuals into high stress and low stress categories based on their psychological stress on Indian population. (John et al., 2006).

A massive body of literature review have recorded the widespread usage of GHQ-12's in various populations worldwide. In a study of South African healthcare workers, the GHQ-12 showed adequate reliability and validity, along with a four-factor model suggesting multidimensionality in this group (Kufe, Bernstein and Wilson, 2023). The reliability and validity of GHQ-12 was found to be satisfactory with a three-factor structure among male tannery workers in India (Kashyap & Singh, 2017).

*The Proactive Coping Inventory (PCI)* (Greenglass et al. Cracow, Poland, 1999). The coping inventory was originally developed by Carver, Schwarzer, and Weintraub (1989) to measure a variety of coping responses. This scale is utilized to measure how individuals deal with stressful situation in daily life. The cope scale is a 55-item self-report measure. The coping inventory consists of seven sub-scale which are i) The proactive coping scale (14 items, (-) Reverse items) ii) Reflective coping scale (11 items) suppression of competing activities (items- 15,33, 42, 55), d) restrain coping (items- 10, 22, 41, 49) and e) seeking of instrumental Social support (items- 4,14, 30, 45); ii) emotion-focused coping: a) seeking Emotional social support (items- 11, 23. 34. 52), b) positive reinterpretation and Growth (items- 1, 29, 38, 59), c) acceptance (items- 13, 21, 44, 54), d) turning to Religion (items- 7, 18, 48, 60), and e) humor (items- 8, 20, 36, 50); and iii) Dysfunctional coping: a) focus on and venting of emotions (items- 3, 17, 28, 46), b) Denial (items - 6, 27, 40, 57), c) behavioural disengagement (items- 9, 24, 37, 51), d) mental disengagement (items- 2, 16, 31, 43), and e) alcohol/drug use (items- 12,26, 35, 53). Respondents had to choose their answers from a four-point scale 1, 2, 3 and 4. Lowest score indicates 1 and gradually highest score indicates 4. Higher score on each measure was indicating more of that component. The test-retest reliability of the scale was found ranging from .39 to .87 which is pretty close to original scale (ranging from .46 to .86).

*The Big Five Inventory (BFI)* (John, O. P., & Srivastava, S., 1999) this inventory was originally developed by Costa & McCrae, 1991. After that John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991 advanced 44 prototypic items moulded into short phrases measuring five dimensions of personality traits: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism. This questionnaire contains 44 items, of which 8 Items for extraversion (1, 6R, 11, 16, 21R, 26, 31R, 36); 9 items for agreeableness (2R, 7, 12R, 17, 22, 27R, 32, 37R, 42); 9 items for conscientiousness (3, 8R, 13,18R, 23R, 28, 33, 38, 43R); 8 items for neuroticism (4, 9R, 14, 19, 24R,29, 34R, 39) and the remaining 10 items for openness (5, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30, 35R, 40, 41R, 44) personality ("R" denotes reverse-scored items i.e. negative items). The response Format is Likert-type like Agree strongly (5), Agree a

little (4), Neither agree nor disagree (3), Disagree a little (2) and Disagree strongly (1) for positive items. In the case of four dimensions namely Openness, extraversion, agreeableness and conscientiousness, high score indicates positive symptoms of the personality characteristics and in case of neurotic Personality high score indicates high anxious, hostile and self-conscious. The test- retest reliability of the scale was found ranging from 0.75 to 0.90.

### **Data collection**

Data collection was conducted through an online survey using Google Form. The form was circulated via WhatsApp among people falling in the inclusion criteria. To ensure confidentiality, no personally recognizable information/data was shared with anyone, and participants were informed that their responses would be kept anonymous. The approximate time taken to complete the questionnaire is around 15-20 minutes. 282 participants were reached out, among that 268 fitted into the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Out of 268, 255 participants had successfully completed the questionnaire set without any omissions. All the responses were tabulated and data was calculated. The research was approved by the Institutional Ethical and Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC) of Government General Degree College, Singur.

### **Statistical Analysis**

Descriptive analysis of the study population was performed (i.e., mean  $\pm$  standard deviation for continuous variables), Pearson correlation coefficient was used to evaluate the correlation of personality traits with coping styles and binary logistic regression was used to explore which personality factors and coping styles that predict stress. t-test was conducted to test the difference between males and females with respect to coping styles.

## Results

### Sample Demographics

In this study, (255) undergraduate students (male = 153; female = 102) with mean age  $19.5 \pm 1.12$ ; 153 (60%) male and 102 (40%) female; unmarried college students were examined. The descriptive results are presented in table 1 and table 2.

### Descriptive Data Analysis

The mean and S.D. of the proactive coping inventory scales are presented in Table 1. Results indicate participants had the highest score in Proactive Coping (M= 39.6, SD=6.21) followed by Reflective coping (M= 32.7, SD= 6.85), Preventive coping (M=30.1, SD= 6.57) and least score in Strategic planning (M= 11.7, SD= 2.80) followed by Instrumental support seeking (M=22.2, SD= 6.89), Emotional support seeking (M= 13.4, SD=3.82) and Avoidance coping (M=7.72, SD=2.09).

The mean and S.D. of the big five personality traits are presented in Table 2. Results indicate participants scored highest in Openness (M= 33.6, SD=5.02) followed by Agreeableness (M= 31.0, SD=5.05) and least score in Conscientiousness (M= 28.2, SD=5.12) followed by Extraversion (M=23.7, SD= 4.73) and Neuroticism (M= 22.4, SD=5.02).

**Table 1: Mean and Standard deviation (S.D.) of Proactive Coping Inventory scale (N= 255)**

| Sub scales                | Mean | SD   |
|---------------------------|------|------|
| Proactive coping          | 39.6 | 6.21 |
| Reflective coping         | 32.7 | 6.85 |
| Strategic planning        | 11.7 | 2.80 |
| Preventive coping         | 30.1 | 6.57 |
| Instrumental support      | 22.2 | 6.89 |
| Emotional support seeking | 13.4 | 3.82 |
| Avoidance coping          | 7.72 | 2.09 |

Source: Field Data



**Table 2: Mean and Standard deviation (S.D.) of Big Five Inventory scale (BFI)**

| Sub scales        | Mean | SD   |
|-------------------|------|------|
| Openness          | 33.6 | 5.02 |
| Conscientiousness | 28.2 | 5.12 |
| Extraversion      | 23.7 | 4.73 |
| Agreeableness     | 31.0 | 5.05 |
| Neuroticism       | 22.4 | 5.02 |

Source: Field Data

Table 3 shows Pearson's correlations between personality traits and coping styles. Here openness and extraversion are significantly positively correlated with proactive coping, reflective coping, strategic planning, preventive coping, instrumental support seeking, whereas conscientiousness and agreeableness is significantly positively correlated with proactive coping, reflective coping, strategic planning, preventive coping. Conscientiousness and extraversion are negatively correlated with avoidance coping (though not significant). Neuroticism is significantly negatively correlated with proactive coping, reflective coping, strategic planning, preventive coping, instrumental support seeking.

**Table 3: Correlation between coping strategies and personality dimensions**

|                   | Proactive coping | Reflective coping | Strategic planning | Preventive coping | Instrumental support seeking | Emotional support seeking | Avoidance coping |
|-------------------|------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------|
| Openness          | 0.363***         | 0.474***          | 0.383***           | 0.391***          | 0.227*                       | 0.115                     | 0.039            |
| Conscientiousness | 0.324**          | 0.357***          | 0.418***           | 0.385***          | 0.179                        | 0.020                     | -0.161           |
| Extraversion      | 0.471***         | 0.326**           | 0.309**            | 0.306**           | 0.267*                       | 0.111                     | -0.049           |
| Agreeableness     | 0.257*           | 0.433***          | 0.385***           | 0.417***          | 0.155                        | 0.049                     | 0.093            |
| Neuroticism       | -0.261*          | -0.267*           | -0.228*            | -0.336**          | -0.313**                     | -0.073                    | 0.053            |

Note. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$  Source: Field Data

Table 4 shows the role of personality traits and coping style in predicting stress using binary logistic regression where stress was the dependent variable. Two separate logistic regression test was performed with personality traits and coping styles as independent variables respectively. For logistic equation 1, where personality factors were considered as independent variables for predicting stress, the logistic regression model was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(7) = 39.68, p < .001$  the model explained 16.3% (Nagelkerke  $R^2$ ) of the variance in stress and correctly classified 85.9% of cases. Neuroticism was found to be a predictor (risk factor) for stress ( $p = .000$ ) but other personality dimensions did not show significant relationship in predicting stress.

For logistic equation 2, where coping styles were considered as independent variables for predicting stress, the logistic regression model was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(7) = 25.079, p < .000$ . the model explained 25% (Nagelkerke  $R^2$ ) of the variance in stress and correctly classified 84.7% of cases. In case of coping strategies, proactive coping (.042) and emotional support seeking ( $p = .000$ ) were protective factors for stress level.

**Table 4: Logistic regression analysis of personality dimensions and coping strategies predicting stress.**

| Variable               | Nagelkerke $R^2$ | $\beta$ | S.E. | Wald   | Pvalue | OR    | 95%CI       |
|------------------------|------------------|---------|------|--------|--------|-------|-------------|
| Personality dimensions |                  |         |      |        |        |       |             |
| Openness               | 0.163            | -.002   | .044 | .003   | .959   | .998  | .916-1.087  |
| Conscientiousness      |                  | .062    | .042 | 2.2204 | .138   | 1.064 | .980-1.154  |
| Extraversion           |                  | -.062   | .050 | 1.529  | .216   | .940  | .851-1.037  |
| Agreeableness          |                  | .051    | .045 | 1.290  | .256   | 1.053 | .963-1.151  |
| Neuroticism            |                  | .184    | .045 | 16.412 | .000   | 1.202 | 1.099-1.313 |
| Coping Strategies      |                  |         |      |        |        |       |             |

|                              |      |       |      |        |      |       |              |
|------------------------------|------|-------|------|--------|------|-------|--------------|
| Proactive coping             | .251 | -.090 | .044 | 4.125  | .042 | .914  | .838 – .997  |
| Reflective coping            |      | .029  | .057 | .269   | .604 | 1.030 | .921 – 1.151 |
| Strategic planning           |      | .164  | .125 | 1.724  | .189 | 1.178 | .922 – 1.504 |
| Preventive coping            |      | -.058 | .049 | 1.392  | .238 | .943  | .856 – 1.039 |
| Instrumental support seeking |      | .032  | .090 | .540   | .462 | 1.033 | .948 – 1.126 |
| Emotional support seeking    |      | -.361 | .102 | 15.953 | .000 | .697  | .584 – .832  |
| Avoidance coping             |      | -.124 | .883 | 1.464  | .226 |       | .723 – 1.080 |

Source: Field Data

Table 5 shows the differences between males and females with respect to the coping dimensions. Significant differences in case of gender have been observed for instrumental support seeking and avoidance coping, with males having high score in case of instrumental support seeking whereas females scored higher in avoidance coping.

**Table 5: Differences between males and females with respect to proactive coping inventory scores**

|                              | Mean  |         | t     | p    | Cohen's d |
|------------------------------|-------|---------|-------|------|-----------|
|                              | Males | Females |       |      |           |
| Proactive coping             | 39.68 | 39.47   | .272  | .786 | 0.033     |
| Reflective coping            | 32.82 | 32.55   | .303  | .762 | 0.039     |
| Strategic planning           | 11.78 | 11.55   | .632  | .528 | 0.082     |
| Preventive coping            | 30.33 | 29.64   | .820  | .413 | 0.105     |
| Instrumental support seeking | 23.45 | 20.35   | 3.613 | .000 | 0.462     |
| Emotional support seeking    | 13.52 | 13.11   | .847  | .398 | 0.108     |

|                  |      |      |       |      |        |
|------------------|------|------|-------|------|--------|
| Avoidance coping | 7.47 | 8.08 | 2.340 | .020 | -0.299 |
|------------------|------|------|-------|------|--------|

Source: Field Data

## Discussion

The aim of the present study was to investigate the relationship between different personality dimensions and coping styles and find out which personality dimensions and coping styles predict stress. Also, the study examined the differences between males and females with respect to coping styles. Here in this study, we have used the Big five questionnaire to evaluate personality traits, which includes openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism. Openness is a multidimensional facet describing accessibility, transparency and willing to accept new ideas which is expressed as core personality traits such as curiosity, creativity, imagination. Conscientiousness is a conglomeration of traits such as self-discipline, organization, and dependability. Individuals high in this dimension are generally goal oriented, plans ahead and acts in a disciplined, dutiful way to achieve aims. It also involves more matured control of impulses on the part of the individual and redirecting them, following rules and carrying out tasks efficiently. Extraversion, a personality trait encompassing character traits such that are more focussed on the external world, with individuals who are adept in social interactions and are in search of external stimulation. Extraversion involves traits such as sociability, assertiveness, talkativeness, enthusiasm and stimulation seeking. Agreeableness amalgamates traits such as kindness, empathy, and cooperation. Individuals high in this dimension generally prioritizes social harmony and social relationships, usually trust others and have an altruistic nature. In nutshell these individuals prefer cooperation over conflict. Lastly, neuroticism is portrayed by a chronic/innate tendency to experience negative emotions coupled by emotional instability, anxiety, depression and self-doubt. Individuals high on this trait often perceive benign situations as threatening and they have poor and biased perception and management of stress.

Results show there exists a significant positive correlation in case of extraversion and openness personality traits with proactive coping style, reflective coping style, strategic planning style, preventive coping style and instrumental support seeking style. Also there exists a significant positive correlation between conscientiousness and agreeableness with proactive coping, reflective coping, strategic planning, preventive coping. Neuroticism personality trait shows a significant negative correlation with proactive coping style, reflective coping style, strategic planning style, preventive coping style and instrumental support seeking style. According to the findings it can be said that individuals high in extraversion and openness tend to use more adaptive coping strategies, this also holds equally true for individuals high in conscientiousness and agreeableness. An interesting observation is that conscientiousness and extraversion have also shown negative correlation with avoidance coping style whereas openness and agreeableness have positive correlation with avoidance coping style (both not statistically significant). Proactive coping involves taking initiative and planning ahead to prevent stress. It is possible that individuals who are open to new experiences tend to engage more in proactive coping who are organized and responsible, are also likely to use proactive coping whereas reflective coping is also a proactive, cognitive strategy involving self-reflection to analyse stressors, reflect on emotional reactions and refine coping responses. Strategic planning style involves locating a goal and analysing which operations or resources need to be aligned with that goal. It requires identifying which operations are working well and which are not and brainstorming ideas to address problems. Strategic planning is a methodical approach to managing stress and preventive coping involves taking action such as building resources or actively planning to reduce the outcome of plausible future stressors. Study findings suggest that individuals high on extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness and openness have shown to use this all these types of coping. Earlier research findings have also documented that individuals high on extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness and openness are more prone to use proactive and reflective coping styles (Akter, Sultana &, Akter 2020; Chai, & Low 2015). Instrumental support coping involves practical assistance that helps individual manage

and reduce stress and fulfil personal needs, results reveal that extroverts and individuals high in openness seek instrumental support more frequently. It maybe that individuals high on extraversion and openness generally are more socially active and direct their energy towards external situations are more prone to use these types of coping styles, which is in consistent with some of previous researches (Afshar et al., 2015).

The study results have demonstrated that higher neuroticism is associated with less use of proactive coping, reflective coping, strategic planning, preventive coping, instrumental support whereas positively correlated with avoidance coping (though not statistically significant). Avoidance coping involves evading the stressor rather than challenging or opposing it. In elaborating on this it could be argued that as neuroticism is more associated with subjective experiences of stress and anxiety symptoms (Ebstrup, 2011) they are usually more susceptible to anxiety/obsessional and irrational thoughts, rumination which in turn renders them towards poor impulse control (Costa, McCrae, 1992.), also they have a tendency to experience negative emotions (McCrae, Costa, 1987), so their coping mechanisms usually gets driven towards managing these issues rather than actively seeking solutions to stressful situations. It may be due to this they generally more towards more maladaptive coping styles (Lee-Baggley, Preece, Delongis 2005; Chai &Low, 2015). Considering the regression analysis, it shows that in case of personality dimensions neuroticism is a risk factor predicting stress and in case of coping strategies, proactive coping and emotional support seeking style have emerged as protective factors of stress. This perception or understanding can help customize psychological interventions to enhance coping mechanisms by considering individual personality profiles. Analysing gender differences with regard to coping scores shows significant differences in case of instrumental support seeking and avoidance coping. Instrumental support seeking involves looking for practical help from others. Mean score of males was found to be higher for instrumental support seeking which indicates that there is a tendency in males to use proactive, problem-focused coping strategies which generally involves tangible help, advice, or resources

to manage stressful situations. Whereas higher mean scores have been observed in case of females for avoidance coping indicating that females are more likely to change their behaviour to evade uncomfortable thoughts, feelings, or situations rather than addressing them. Study by Graves et al., 2021 reveal that females employ emotion-focussed coping dimensions which include self-distraction, emotional support, instrumental support, and venting more than males (Graves et al., 2021). Also, research has documented that females indulge more in Blame/Denial type of Coping whereas males tend to engage more in emotion focused way of coping (Som & Patil, 2019).

## **Conclusion**

The study attempted to offer a comprehensive understanding about the relationship between personality dimensions, coping styles and stress among college students. Several connections have been revealed between personality dimensions and coping styles. With respect to personality dimensions neuroticism has emerged as a risk factor for stress and in case of coping styles proactive coping and emotional support seeking are protecting factors for stress. Gender differences are found in case of instrumental support seeking and avoidance coping. The study provided knowledge about personality dimensions, coping styles and stress providing opportunities for fostering specific actions or intervention strategies for stress management. The study suffers some limitations. Firstly, as the study was conducted on college students in Singur region of West-Bengal (WB) it provided a somewhat constrained view of the issue, it would be better if we could include college students from different regions of WB and then the results could have been generalized to the entire population residing in WB. Secondly, as the data is collected in online mode and also self-report questionnaires were used, there may be incorrect/ biased data. It would be better if the data collection could be conducted offline. Thirdly, more specific results would have been obtained if some other criteria such as socio economics status, background, culture, life events etc. could be incorporated in the study. Fourthly, it would be better if large sample could be used. Lastly in this study the relationship between personality traits, coping strategies and stress has been studied but it would be further

contributory if we could trace the developmental trajectory as to why certain personality traits are more prone to use certain coping strategies and if early life exposure to stressful situation shapes choice of certain coping strategies. Attending to these limitations would fortify the study's findings and enhance the understanding of the relationship between personality traits, coping strategies and stress.

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## A Sociological Study of the Quarter-Life Crisis in the Film “Dear Zindagi”<sup>1</sup>

Neha Sewa<sup>2</sup>

Kaira, a central part of the narration who happens to be a young, talented female cinematographer played by Alia Bhatt (a Bollywood actress), suffers from emotional turmoil in the film. She struggles with personal and professional instability in her everyday life; a common experience associated with a ‘quarter-life crisis.’ This film offers a nuanced portrayal of psychological distress that is both individually and socially conditioned. Hence, I have tried to examine the film Dear Zindagi (2016) as a cinematic exploration of the quarter-life crisis through the lens of gender and emotional trauma. From a sociological perspective, I have tried to understand the quarter-life crisis not merely as a psychological condition, but have analysed it through a macro perspective as an impact of the larger social structure. As a social researcher, I have also tried to understand the popularity and importance of therapy in modern society.

**Keywords:** quarter-life crisis, feminine, everyday life, films, trauma, therapy

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Films are one of the primary sources of entertainment, particularly in Indian society. For a very long time, films have served as a mirror of society. The potential of cinema from the beginning has been used in such a way which benefits society. The role of cinema in society has been recognised from the very beginning of Cinema itself (Khatttri & Singh, 2021). But for decades, the characters in the films were extremely stereotypical: the males were always the main characters, showing off bravery and a heroic attitude, saving a soft, poised female character, and following the same typical love stories. However, in recent times, there has been a shift in the context of some of the Bollywood movies. Some films are actually trying to depict the real lives of people in society, similar complexities, some taboo topics like mental health issues, family issues, childhood traumas, etc. Films like *Anjaana Anjaani* (2010), *Heroine* (2012), *Chhichhore* (2019), *Tamasha* (2015), and *A Death in the Gunj* (2016) have portrayed mental health issues and personal identity crises. Even now, though, there are stigmas attached to mental health issues; media such as films are trying to remove them by sharing these sensitive yet significant issues with the public for mass consciousness. Gradually, even people have started acknowledging and accepting that this is not being so-called 'mad' but rather a phase of mental disturbance and not illness. Hence, it can be cured with support, and it should be cured so that we as humans do not create a depressed society. *Dear Zindagi* (2016), by Gauri Shinde, is one of the standout examples of a film that explores the common problems of a young woman facing relationship and family issues, and questioning gender roles and societal norms. It's a film that many young women can relate to who are going through somewhat similar situations in their lives. The film tells the story of a young protagonist, Kaira, a cinematographer by profession, suffering from anxiety, depression and also philophobia- a fear of commitment. I have tried to examine all aspects of the quarter-life crisis in the movie and reflect on its particular gendered issues, causes, and impacts.

A phenomenon that has recently gained attention, termed as 'quarter-life crisis' in both psychological literature and popular culture, is a period of uncertainty, confusion, self-doubt, and instability regarding all major aspects of life in one's 20s and mid-30s. For example, confusion in decision-making, commitment issues in a relationship, low or no

job satisfaction, or questioning the very existence of your own self. The term 'quarter-life crisis' was coined and popularised by Alexandra Robbins and Abby Wilner in 2001 in their book, "Quarter-Life Crisis- The Unique Challenges of Life in Your Twenties". In this book, the authors have identified a series of emotional and existential experiences, including a fear of failure, feeling lost, financial stress, questioning one's identity, relational ambiguity, and a sense of being unprepared for adult life. Robbins and Wilner (2001) contrasted the quarter-life crisis with the mid-life crisis. A midlife crisis often springs from stagnation or reflection on past achievements. In contrast, a quarter-life crisis is triggered by instability, too many options, and the collapse of the clear "map" that schooling has provided. Wilner's interviews and case studies reveal that young adults often experience anxiety, instability, and self-doubt as they attempt to establish careers, relationships, and personal identities. The book is primarily qualitative and anecdotal rather than based on empirical, formal academic research; however, it has definitely emphasised youth culture and mental health. A quarter-life crisis may be considered a relatively recent phenomenon due to the complexities of modern life. The society has changed and is currently at an advanced stage; career choices have multiplied, making the youth more confused about their career decisions. Too many options available from offline to online make their relationships complicated. However, no matter how advanced society becomes, traditions, culture, norms, and values are still attached to it; hence, the youth are expected to both advance society and adhere to its cultural norms. For example, being economically successful at an early age, settling down through marriage, and the compulsion to have offspring are typical expectations that Indian society places on the youth. The impact becomes more crucial when it comes to gender-based dimensions.

The film "*Dear Zindagi*" has depicted all the aspects of a 'quarter-life crisis'- from career dissatisfaction, fear of rejection and abandonment, failed relationships, pressure from family due to societal norms and emotional fatigue. These are all the significant patterns that Robbins and Wilner referred to as a 'quarter-life crisis'. *Dear Zindagi* has shown the contemporary Indian version of Quarter-life crisis, where a woman's anxiety revolves around the expectations from the family regarding career, getting married at a

specific age, and what society calls being “settled”. Kaira, the lead character, goes through career dissatisfaction, which is clearly shown from the beginning of the film. In her career and her relationships, she always takes new tolls on herself. Her fear of being rejected or abandoned makes her a philophobic, who fears committing to a serious relationship. She also hustles to maintain a relationship with her parents. She develops the character of a messy girl, fed up with parents, boyfriends, and relationships. The film has shown how external situations affect an individual's mental health. The continuous battle within oneself is clearly visible in Kaira. The regular questioning of oneself about existence, career choices, and relationship choices is what we call the quarter-life crisis. Hence, the researcher tries to understand the gender-biased quarter-life crisis in the film *‘Dear Zindagi’* and also understands the ‘therapy’ as a safe space and generalises it in everyday life.

### **The Stages of the Quarter-Life Crisis in the case of Kaira**

The quarter-life crisis is often neglected, dismissed as just a by-product of a complex modern society. But only someone who goes through this transition period can understand. A quarter-life crisis is not just a phase but rather a restructuring of one's life. It is the time when one realises that the entire script of life since childhood, i.e., to study hard, get excellent marks, crack an entrance exam or a dream job, get married, etc., is failing to deliver a sense of fulfilment. Kaira's journey of navigating through the quarter-life crisis went through all five stages of awakening. For Kaira, the crisis did not come all of a sudden on one fine morning, but rather it was a crisis that came up gradually by piling up all the emotions and situations. One would clearly see at the beginning of the film that Kaira was portrayed as a young, rising female cinematographer- a successful individual who is great at her job. She is passionate about her job. She has friends with whom she shares close connections, and they are reliable too. Her social life is great, but behind a happy, successful life, there is a profound dissatisfaction that Kaira never accepts. She often tries to rationalise her problems and logically reasons them.

Kaira's navigation through the quarter-life crisis was through various stages, where the



first stage was denial- a coping mechanism. And when Kaira's mind cannot resist accepting that there is a problem, it begins to leak. This stage is neither dramatic nor explosive in nature; it comes slowly and works in micro conditions in everyday life, like betrayal of self-interests, often misinterpreted as laziness, which is actually an involuntary revolt by the mind. When the mind is revolting, destruction happens. It is seen that Kaira starts picking up fights with her close friends, stays irritated all the time because her mind wants a change, while her consciousness is afraid to initiate and accept the reality. When the mind cannot take it anymore, the second stage begins, which can be called the Vulnerable Stage, where life feels like it has been disoriented, and there is a lack of alignment. After this stage, a clear effect of the quarter-life crisis is shown where Kaira loses her sleep, her appetite and wants to cut herself off from the world. And after Kaira has an emotional breakdown, she accepts the discomfort. This is the stage of Acceptance, where one kills the ego and tries to analyse the problems. Here, Kaira looks within herself- her true self, away from parental and societal expectations. Kaira started prioritising her own interests and the little things that she missed about her childhood.

The final stage- Acceptance is not a total resignation from one's present life but rather a conscious participation. Kaira neither changed herself completely nor left everything, but rather she understood that not everything has to be perfect. All she started was taking little steps towards the cycle of growth. The dialogue of Dr Jehangir well defines the life of youth, i.e

Hum hamesha mushkil raasta kyun chunte hain? Zaroori nahi hai ki har cheez ko paane ke liye pehle mushkil raasta hi chuna jaye. Kabhi kabhi aasan raasta bhi toh sahi ho sakta hai na?"- Why do we always choose the difficult path? It is not necessary that whatever we choose to aspire to can be found only in difficult paths; sometimes, we can get things in easy paths as well.

She accepted that career or relationships are not everything, but a part of her life. As Dr. Jehangir says in one of the scenes,

Genius is not someone who has all the answers ... Genius is someone who has the patience for all the answers.

### **Institutional Decay: The Family and Workplace as a Site of Conflict**

The transition of an individual from an infant to adulthood is quite a predictable one in education, and then they enter the workforce, marriage, etc. This is a linear progression in an individual's life. However, India as a country has significantly shifted from a traditional country to a more modern one. The modern Indian youth are facing a different scenario, i.e., competition in the modern world, while keeping the traditional values rooted, leading to experiencing a severe quarter-life crisis. Social Institutions are a core part of society. Social Institutions are established to regularise all the members of society. Institutions such as family, marriage, and religion have their own crucial role to play. Family, as a social institution, plays an important role in regularising a child's behaviour. Family also plays a primary role in the process of socialisation. Giddens and Sutton (2014, pp. 263-264), defines socialisation as a process that transforms a quite helpless human infant into a self-aware, knowledgeable person who is skilled in the ways of their society's culture. Family is the place where the first process of learning takes place. Family dictates the paths of duties, norms, values and conformity. In the case of Kaira, the institution of family was, however, ruptured during her childhood itself. Patterson et al. (2015) have rightly argued that a greater number of separations from primary caregivers or greater numbers of residential moves are more likely to have problems in adjustment. A similar pattern was seen in the case of Kaira when she was a child. First, she is left in her grandparents' house, and while she gets comfortable there and attached to her grandparents, she is once again separated from them, causing a deep wound subconsciously. And because of this past experience, Kaira had a strained relationship with her parents, creating an emotional wound. In one of the scenes, Dr Jehnagir has rightly said,

Don't let your past blackmail your present to ruin a beautiful future.

The entire idea of family as an important institution failed to provide the stability and emotional labour that was necessary for Kaira as a child. Kaira's struggles project how parents burdened her with their unfulfilled desires. Family is shown as a place where Kaira hesitates to sit and is not comfortable. Kaira's crisis is a

reaction against her upbringing and social conditioning, where she was never prioritised. While during the therapy taken by Kaira, her therapist explains how it is important to look at our parents just as other human beings who can make mistakes. As he quotes:

Hum apne parents se itni umeedain kyun rakhte hain? Hum bhool jaate hain ki woh bhi toh kisi ke bachhe hain ... aur unhe bhi life jeene ka koi manual nahi mila tha.....Parents ko bhagwan ka darja diya jata hai ... par woh bhagwan nahi hote. Woh sirf do insaan hote hain, jinhone humein paida kiya hai. Aur insaano se galtiyan hoti hain.

After the primary socialisation done by parents in childhood, adult socialisation takes place in colleges or the workplace. In modern society, where the grasp of parents is a little loose, it is the workplace that gives an identity to the individual. This film offers a sharp critique of the contemporary labour market. This movie depicts the creative industry as high-pressure, exploitative, and favouritism-driven. Sociologically, in the terms of Karl Marx, we can call it a Structural Alienation. Kaira's work was subsequently changed at the whims of her clients, making her feel disconnected and alienated from her own creativity. When she fails to find stability in both her personal relationships and her career, she internalises it as a 'systemic failure'. She blames herself for being at fault, leading to anxiety and depression that define a phenomenon of quarter-life crisis.

### **Disruption of the 'Traditional' Social Script**

Sociologically, the quarter-life crisis that Kaira was going through was due to the conflict between herself and the social structure. There was a clear presence of generational conflict between Kaira and her parents. Kaira desired to be an autonomous individual guided by her own terms and principles of life, while her parents and surroundings pressured her to adhere to traditional roles, such as a stable career and marriage. There is a particular scene in the film where Kaira's mother is talking to another female character, and they discuss that if Kaira does not marry soon at a young age, all the good guys will get married. This sort of stereotypical mindset causes immense pressure in the mind of a young individual who wants to succeed, not in traditional roles but rather in their career. Her

parents assumed that her major milestones of life were delayed, as she had not yet achieved domestic markers of her adulthood. While Kaira has a conversation with Dr Jehangir, she mentions:

Gharwalo ko lagta hai ki agar ladki 25 saal ki ho gayi toh bas, uski shaadi karwa do ...  
jaise koi expiry date aa gayi ho.

My family thinks that if a girl turns 25 years old, then she should be tied up in marriage as if it's an expiry date.

Kaira also had an earlier encounter with the narrow-mindedness of the people, where she was refused an apartment for rent as she was unmarried. Marriage was necessary even to have a home, that too in a metropolitan city. Giddens (1991) calls this "the burden of choice". She knows what she wants out of her life and career, but the pressure makes over burdened with other choices, causing existential anxiety. Kaira faces an internalised stigma when she shames herself about her multiple failed relationships. Her mental health reflected how she was not traditionally an 'ideal' woman who is calm, submissive, emotionally composed, docile and family-oriented. With all these stigmas due to societal expectations, Kaira isolates herself. Isolation is one of the key features of Urban centres. People often have weak social ties that are often replaced with professional relationships. Durkheim (1893) has rightly talked about the features of traditional society guided by mechanical solidarity based on likeness and a collective conscience. While the urban society is bound by organic solidarity based on interdependence with individual conscience. Organic solidarity gives an individual more freedom, but also gives potential to anomie. Kaira's internal crisis is exactly that of a victim caught in this transition of two different states, causing emotional fluidity as a form of social failure.

### **Trauma, Memory, and the Feminine Psyche**

The feminine psyche is shaped by many factors, including biological, hormonal, environmental, social, mental, and cognitive processing. These factors are equally important in shaping a woman's attitude. In the history of psychology, many theorists proposed variations on the feminine psyche, one of which is Toni Wolff's

"Structural Forms of the Feminine Psyche." Her essay *Structural Forms of the Feminine Psyche* was written with the express intention of helping "modern" women on their road to better "self-knowledge and self-realisation". She strongly encourages women to get to know their innermost priorities and to be aware that not every cultural period offers optimal conditions for the realisation of one's true inner nature (Vermeesch, 2021). She gave four distinct types of feminine psyche: Mother (and spouse), Amazon, Hetaira (companion, lover, wife, friend), Medial woman. Each type has a distinct feature, but Amazon (a career-driven woman) is the one Kaira resembles. Throughout the long history of human civilisation and the establishment of society, deliberate efforts were made to ignore or exclude women in every situation. Women actively participated, but were never mentioned in history. It is a sad reality that in a patriarchal society, women remain subordinate to men. Their feelings and sayings never really mattered. They were respected and accepted in society only if they played the roles of passive wives and mothers. While society never accepted or appreciated women who were career-driven, opinionated or tried to find equality in a male-dominant society. All these external dominances of men had somehow made women either passive or extremely rebellious. As mentioned earlier, Kaira resembles the feminine psyche 'Amazon'-career driven, independent, the boss lady character, but due to external factors of childhood trauma and career issues, she became stubborn and rebellious.

- All the mental health issues and internal conflicts within oneself are mostly due to external situations. Kaira's mental problems were deeply rooted in the childhood experiences she had as her parents abandoned her, leaving her in her grandparents' house. The event became encoded as emotional memory, creating patterns of fear of intimacy, difficulty trusting, and anticipatory rejection. This was the primary reason why she faced problems while forming relationships, as she believed that she was an "inconvenience". She always detached herself before anyone could leave or hurt her. According to Caruth's theory of trauma (1996), the pain of trauma does not show right away. It returns later through emotional pain and behaviour, which was clearly visible in the

behaviour of Kaira. Her childhood trauma subconsciously stayed with her, causing issues with her everyday life, with sudden breakdown of emotions, which were confusing for her as well. Trauma does not stay in the past; it is remembered by the nervous system, not just the mind. In one of the scenes, where one of the characters of the film quotes a saying from William Faulkner's novel, *Requiem for a Nun*, "the past is never dead" (Faulkner, 1951, p. 156).

It's not even the past," terrifically makes us understand that the memories, events or experiences are not settled within a period separately, rather it continues to influence the present as well as the future in profound ways.

### Therapy in Everyday Life

Therapy is still not very popular, as most people think it's not required, since we need other doctors in our everyday lives. As the character of Dr Jehangir states:

Humare samaj mein agar koi thoda sa pagal ho jata hai toh log usse doctor ke paas le jate hain ... lekin agar koi thoda sa udaas ho jaye toh log kehte hain 'chalo koi baat nahi, movie dekh kar aate hain, theek ho jayega'.

In our society, if anyone gets mentally sick, then he/she is taken to the doctor, but if someone is depressed, then it is taken casually. Therapy is finally getting recognised in the arena of mental health issues. People are slowly believing in therapies and are seeking professional help to get through the difficult phase of their everyday lives. A 15-year analytical study of public discourse on platforms like X (formerly Twitter) demonstrated a profound change in how society views psychological disciplines (Domingo-Espiñeira et al., 2024). The data revealed that public sentiment has grown increasingly collaborative and positive, creating an environment that actively encourages early intervention and timely help-seeking behavior rather than hiding distress (Domingo-Espiñeira et al., 2024). In a quarter-life crisis, people may not require professional help if the symptoms are mild and temporary, as they can be tackled through meditation, journaling, talking out with friends and family. But if persistent sadness or anxiety is lasting up to weeks or months, trouble in functioning daily, like focusing, working, sleeping or maintaining

routines, feeling of overwhelm, hopelessness and unable to cope, therapy is thus required. Other issues, like repeated patterns of conflict, fear of commitment or avoidance in one's relationship, persistent impact of past trauma, like old memories of childhood wounds, resurface and feel unmanageable, and loss of purpose or direction, like feeling disconnected from life or feeling of numbness, therapy is required as it provides clarity, coping tools and emotional support. Other than mental symptoms, there are physical symptoms of a severe quarter-life crisis, like headaches, fatigue, panic, or changes in appetite. *Dear Zindagi*, as a movie, has depicted almost all the aspects of a severe quarter-life crisis that Kaira faced, from traumas related to her childhood to coping with the challenges of settling into her career and forming a stable relationship. Her crisis brought sudden panic attacks, sleepless nights and loss of appetite. However, one day, when she sees Dr Jehangir Khan, a psychologist who talks about the differences between a psychiatrist and a psychologist. He clearly defined it in a very simple manner, that common people have a preconceived notion about mental issues.

Therapy is usually understood as a common practice done in a clinical setting under four walls. However, it should be understood that it's not a matter of one day or one session, but it extends beyond into everyday life. Psychological research shows that therapy supports individuals by improving their overall functioning in everyday life. It regulates individuals' thoughts, emotions, and behaviours that occur in daily situations (Corey, 2017). The development of 'Self-awareness' is regarded as one of the key contributions of therapy. Many daily reactions are shaped by past experiences and learned patterns that operate automatically, which was also seen in the case of Kaira's actions and reactions. Therapy encourages individuals to reflect on these patterns that operate and recognise how earlier experiences influence present behaviour (Beck, 2011). There was a slow and steady shift in Kaira's behaviour after she started therapy. There was no sudden change but a gradual progress of 'self-awareness' after her self-assessment through proper guidance and therapy sessions. This allowed her to respond more thoughtfully rather than react impulsively in all the interactions of her everyday

life- including her family, friends, relationships and work. Therapy helps to support emotional understanding in one's life. Research suggests that the ability to identify and describe emotions is linked to improved emotional regulation and psychological well-being (Gross, 2015). Therapy helped Kaira to let go of the baggage of emotions that she carried unwillingly, which always stopped her from maintaining her relationships.

In everyday life, emotional stability helps individuals to regulate their emotions precisely without leading to conflict, withdrawal or prolonged distress. It helps to communicate clearly and manage emotional responses more effectively. People often respond to difficulties with self-criticism, which can increase emotional distress (Whelton & Greenberg, 2005; Beck, 2011). Therapy comes in useful here as it affects how individuals see their challenges and mistakes. Kaira was in her extreme self-criticism stage; she highly criticised herself for not being her parents' favourite child, for being in multiple relationships, and for not achieving well in her career. In her conversation with her therapist, Dr Jehangir, she accepted how she feels about herself. Therapy helped her process the mistake and positively acknowledge herself. The song 'Love You Zindagi' in the film aptly describes, through visuals, how Kaira's life has changed after therapy. She has been seen acknowledging herself and her surroundings, including her family. This clearly shows how therapy influences individuals' consciousness, self-compassion and less-judgmental attitude, decreasing anxiety and depression (Neff, 2003). Over time, therapy provides a balanced self-view, contributing to emotional stability in everyday life. The role of Dr Jehangir is sociologically important to understand "therapy" in modern society.

Zindagi ek jigsaw puzzle ki tarah hai ... main toh sirf thode pieces sahi jagah par lagane mein tumhari madad kar raha hoon.

Life is like a jigsaw puzzle; as a therapist, I am just helping to put some pieces in place. When social institutions fail to provide comfort and stability, more individuals are turning to therapy and normalising taking therapy to navigate through crisis.



## **The Feminine Self Beyond Stereotypes**

Traditions occupy a central place in Indian society. These traditions hold a complex and contradictory set of expectations for women. For ages, women have been suffering due to these traditions. Over the years, modernity has infiltrated society, empowering women through financial and emotional independence, granting them equal rights and status in society. Despite all evolving modern influences, the women of India still struggle with the patriarchal mindset and stereotypes of society in their everyday lives. For centuries, the traditional role of women in our Indian society has been closely tied to the four walls of domesticity. Women were primarily seen as free labour who cook, clean, raise children and care for elders without any economic benefit. And after all of these, women were celebrated only when they embodied qualities such as obedience, modesty, and sacrifice without questioning. Marriage, too, was the ultimate destiny for women and was considered a “good woman” only if she was dutiful towards her home. Although managing a household cannot be equated with managing a business, it similarly demands substantial mental resources and time. However, unlike a manager who typically maintains some emotional distance from the enterprise, the person responsible for a household is often deeply emotionally invested, which intensifies the strain and fatigue associated with the role (Barigozzi et al., 2025). Times have changed, but the expectations placed on modern Indian women are far more complex now. As India is developing, gradually becoming more modern and urban, women are encouraged to pursue education, build successful careers, and contribute economically, but without leaving the traditional roles of a perfect “home maker”. Women carry a disproportionate burden of domestic tasks, and this burden may be linked with their health and well-being. In particular, the dimension of cognitive household labour—planning tasks, anticipating needs, and delegating responsibilities—tends to fall particularly frequently to women (Aviv et al., 2024; Daminger, 2019). Women in modern society face a double burden – to excel professionally while still handling almost all the domestic responsibilities. In most Indian households, the independence of women is acceptable only within limits.

Women are encouraged only up to certain levels unless they challenge existing power structures.

In this film, similar instances were seen. Kaira's career as a cinematographer was not taken seriously by her relatives, who asked her to do something serious. And her mother herself was more tense about her marriage, making it the most important thing in any woman's life. In another scene in the movie, it reminds us that a woman cannot have an individual identity in society if she is not married. Her landlord asks her to leave her flat because the committee decides that an unmarried woman cannot stay in those rented flats. Societal expectations are one of the greatest hurdles in women's lives, restricting their mobility. Due to gender norms in a patriarchal society, women often have little or no decision-making power, access to education, or job opportunities. Despite modernity and years of struggles to achieve equality in society, women even now face gender discrimination in the workplace, unequal pay, harassment, and low positions. Even in their own household, daughters are regarded as a "burden" and a debt that needs to be paid off during their marriage. Many parents do not invest in their daughters' education due to a stereotypical belief that investment in a daughter is "temporary". In modern society, problems have become far more complex. Women are now more burdened due to the pressure of balancing both household chores and excelling in the professional world. Modern beauty standards have also raised the bar, with laser hair removal technique, false extension of nails, and picture-perfect no makeup- makeup. Women are also often expected to manage emotions flawlessly while providing stability for others. Kaira's breakdown challenges the stereotype of the "emotionally resilient woman," revealing how trauma fractures internal confidence and relational security.

Regardless of these challenges, a significant transformation has taken place. Education is one of the key factors that empowers millions of women. Women are now in the fields of engineering, law, medicine, politics, and business, which were once dominated by men. Even the Constitution of India have strengthened the right of women in the domain of inheritance, marriage, and workplace equality.

Awareness camps and movements regarding domestic violence, sexual harassment, and gender equality have helped a lot. Along with mass movements, the media and popular culture have played a tremendous role in uplifting the position of women in society. Modern films, advertisements, popular characters, and social media platforms increasingly portray women as independent, having major roles, and ambitious. These women are breaking stereotypes and are influencing many young girls. In urban areas, women are now aware of their rights, receive education and are doing great in their careers. But the change is uneven. While urban areas are growing towards equality, rural areas, marginalised communities and economically backward groups continue to face obstacles. Patriarchal values and norms are even now deeply rooted, making equality struggle harder. In Indian society, though modernity has been adopted, traditions are still deeply rooted, playing a crucial role.

## Conclusion

*Dear Zindagi*, as a film, holds a great sociological significance as it served as a perfect medium that captured the complexity of the modern Indian society, its social structures, mental health issues and individual identity. This film is more than a story of a young girl witnessing a quarter-life crisis phenomenon. It helps to understand the conflict between the collective conscience shifting towards individual consciousness. This film breaks down many stereotypes, such as how Bollywood often portrays an idealised family as a nurturing unit while ignoring all the empirical facts, like parental abandonment and divorces among the parents, etc. It deconstructs the idea of a perfect family where a child should always be forgiving of their parents. Kaira expresses her issues and anger to her parents and sets boundaries, actually depicting the honest familial love. This film also normalises the idea of seeking therapy for clarity in life. This film acts as a mirror of society, which portrays how the young generation living in modern society is unwillingly tied to traditional expectations, causing anxieties and an identity crisis. But it also gives hope that when traditional social structures fail to provide stability, one can always seek external help to recycle one's life.

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## Studying Silences and Marginality: Micro-Narratives of Violence Against Women from a Village in Purulia, West Bengal <sup>1</sup>

Sumantra Chakraborty <sup>2</sup>

This paper delimits violence of its physical nomenclature and intends to delve into attributes that are apparently non-violent in nature and operate under the aegis of culture, tradition and norm, also read as patriarchy. Not all women are tortured, beaten up, raped, abducted or kidnapped; but wherever there exists a binary of man versus woman, or powerful versus powerless and all other such phallogocentric discourses- the woman, goes through a form of violence that is violence against human dignity. Subtle violence, emotional abuse, psychic violence are all a part of hegemony that leads to the actual acts of physical violence or exist at all levels- often more if the woman in question is at a power differential that demands subordination, like that from the maid, house staff, daughter-in-law. Set in a village in the Kashipur block of Purulia District, this paper attempts to view violence from a micro-sociological perspective- it is about the narratives of how women socialised in a particular rural set up view violence around them.

**Keywords:** caste, patriarchy, normalised-violence, otherization, labour, marriage

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This paper is an attempt to delve into the micro-sociology of everyday violence set in a village named Sonathali, block Kashipur, of Purulia district, West Bengal. Some other villages of the same block have been mentioned or referred to elaborate upon. The form of violence that this paper deals with is non-violent violence; that is violence that has been normalised to an extent that it does not fall into the category of violence. This form of violence does not involve physical atrocities like beating, thrashing, rape and other forms of sexual and physical torture assault; nor does this involve intimate partner violence. This paper focuses on emotional-psychic-subtle violences and in that the main act that has been found as a repetition in most of the households is silent treatment, otherization and neglect. According to Abbott et al. (1990), women face three types of violent behaviours- 'derogatory remarks', 'unwanted sexual attention' and 'sexual compulsion'. In the context of the Indian sub-continent the prevalence of 'sacrificial mother' as the sanctification and ultimate 'duty' according to Chitnis (2004), is also a prime reason as to which women are socialised to 'tolerate-adjust-compromise' with the situation rather than voice against it. The UNFPA (ICRW & UNFPA, 2004) mentions mental and emotional as 'manifestations' of domestic violence. Chodorow's concept of 'mothering' (1978), can be referred to here; gender socialisation in India witnesses women specially mothers as passing on the fear of violence and the reciprocating action of silence to their daughters as the 'normalised' ways of surviving. Massey (1994) talks of the allotment of spaces and gender relations, but what remains unchanged is that, even the insides of homes experience gendered violences which escalates in inverse proportion with the power credentials of the person suffering it. So, the 'otherization' of women as de Beauvoir (2015), explains remains in all stages of life.

This paper stands on the narratives of the respondents, their understanding of what violence is and how they perceive it, or their pre-conceived notions of it. As such, subtle violences are actions that are felt and experienced by only a certain section of individuals and appears to have caused no harm at all to others (men), or so is believed. These are acts that are so unseen in their appearances that do not incur physical injury and not read to be violent to the majority of population. The present researcher while conversing with her respondents observed that many of them do not consider such acts

of violation of dignity as acts of violence; this is the depth of internalisation that patriarchy has over the belief systems of the subordinates, that violence is not considered to be violent, rather norm, culture and so. This researcher is maritally related to the village of Sonathali and has been staying in the village for long spans from the year 2009. As such, she did observe such normalisation of physical violence and the internalisation of patriarchy to the point that women themselves are of and do not defend other women in the face of patriarchal domination. But such conversation began as an insider closely talking about the everyday lives. These were random nonchalant small talks. It was only around the time of Covid-19 that is from 2020-21, when this researcher was collecting data for a research work on folk culture in a field that included this village, that a detail query and purposive questioning on the non-violent aspects of violence begun. The methodology was sitting down with women (which was done repeatedly from 2023 up to the 2025-26), who wanted to converse on this subject, not as objective respondents to positivist questionnaire but as agents and hence the researcher depended on unstructured questions and allowed them to talk. Also, because this village is a part of this researcher's lived-in reality, hence she needed time to follow-up each case interviewed (not just as an 'insider' but as an outsider) so that, the voices of the respondents could be understood and studied not as value-loaded leading interpretations but as an insider-outsider observing the surroundings and then collecting and organising the data.

Violence in this case is read from two perspectives- violences that are occurring on an everyday basis and silence that is non-communication, as a form of violence. To explicate upon everyday violences the focus area is inter-caste discriminations that are in such villages experienced the most by woman who are employed in different capacities in upper caste and often co-incidentally upper-class households. This researcher did come across incidences where men who are employed in similar household face discriminations on the lines of caste in their everyday lives; but she chooses to limit the focus of this paper to women only. Two groups of women were interviewed- the first group (20 years and above) were of those who belong to the schedule caste of Bauri and work as helps, or share croppers or landless labourers.

Their experiences involve mostly caste-based discriminations some of which they have also normalised. The other group belong to young daughters-in-law irrespective of caste identity, aged 20 years and above; this group has first generation women employed in organised sectors, apart from the traditional and seasonal occupations of brick kiln work or agricultural work or as maids; these are occupations that involve some kind of educational qualifications. A few women who are the mothers-in-law and are employed have also been interviewed to create a comparative analysis and delve into inter-generational or inter-caste perspectives on violence. The daughters-in-law who have not yet attained the status of mother-in-law are the primary respondents for this purpose.

### **Of Caste and Marriage**

Outside the main gate of a modest looking household belonging to the upper caste family situated in the 'upper' caste neighbourhood of Sonathali village, Kashipur, Purulia, a pair of footwear waits for its owner daily, twice a day. The footwear is united with its owner after she comes out of the house and glides them on. This process repeats itself daily, twice a day. Every time the maids and her family members enter the houses of the employers, their slippers are left outside the premise of the house, on the road; the slippers or footwears and its owner are not audacious enough to enter with their slippers on. The fate of the slipper is decided by the owner's 'caste' it belongs to. This researcher has been observing this procedure of in-dignification repeat itself for years (roughly a span of nine year starting from the 2015, as a resident) and has been internalised to the extent that the person keeping her slippers out considers it to be only normal, like while entering any sanctum sanctorum the impurities are kept out. From within the same household, comes the next glimpse that we shall have before we delve into its sociological analyses is where the daughter-in-law is preparing food for the entire family. It is in the wee hours of the morning, the locality has not really woken up, the local *madhukar* is just venturing out of his house. The daughter-in-law, a first-generation salaried women working as a health worker is preparing breakfast and lunch and if possible, a few meal preps shall be made for the dinner, before she is allowed to venture out for work that provides her salary. She has to complete strenuous household

chores that are already exhausting her and then she embarks for next 'job'. This is a lot like having more than one job but being paid for only one. Also, there are two aspects to her working – she performs clerical jobs in her place of work but ends up doing multiple silly mistakes most of the days, along with making excuses to leave for home early or take leaves very often. This researcher's argument rests on the normalisation of the entire process of violence at both paternal and in-law's house. Of how the place of residence, her in-law's house is a symbol of social standards and not one of food security and comfort. This system oppresses and endures itself with the consequences of deviance as physical violence and or breaking away of the entire set up of 'patri-virilocal' residences. In a reference to varying acts of domestic violence, Abbott and others (1990) mention that the cause of domestic atrocities can be anything from 'not bringing' enough 'dowry' to 'not completing wifely duty' and the definition of this 'wifely duty' is rather vague. Now, urban, self-dependent educated women would at the hindsight suggest keeping a maid, to lessen the work pressure or to smoothen out the everyday functioning but that is where the 'dialectics' reside. Keeping a maid is a status symbol, when they are performing apparently impure chores, but if the maid has to do the pure chores like cooking, then the household is shamed, as that means that the women of the house are not capable enough. This is a regular everyday routine in the villages that this research paper focuses on.

A 'deconstruction' of the mentioned scenarios reveals that there are layers of 'working women' in this household. The household help who comes from a caste with which food commensality is not permitted by 'upper caste' scriptures and norms. In this case, the maid belongs to the lower caste of the Bauri, which is considered as 'untouchables', they are scheduled caste. The next in the hierarchy are women employed in the same household, who do not work on a daily basis in any given household, or so to say that they are not bonded to a particular family and are included within the purity circle and perform jobs as making puffed rice or grinding spices. In this multi-caste village, they come from communities like the *bairagi* bearing the surname of Das who are though scheduled caste but not considered as completely impure or untouchable. The next on the hierarchy are daughters-in-law (who have not become mothers-in-law yet) and

then there are the mothers-in-law who hold the maximum power in this pyramid; and if the grand mother-in-law is alive and active then she tops to be the matriarch. So, in a patriarchal society with androcentric norms, there is marginalisation of women not only by men but also by women themselves, depending upon the 'vectors' or 'indexes' of class position they stand in McDaniel (2003) mentions how women are raised to be 'virtuous' in ways that are in effect controlling them.

The violences that the above two cases hold may seem to be non-existent apparently but violence is not always violent- it might not necessarily be physical violence. Like refusing them entry with shoes is stripping them off their dignity, or strenuous work, marginalisation, sweet-coated insult, humiliation, otherization, insult, discrimination and more, as prices that women pay for belonging to a group or just earning a salary by working for/under someone and sufficing for the family and often it comes across for existing. Does that imply that these are narratives that do not witness any form of physical violence? The answer shall be negative; because whatever an individual goes through rather whatever forms of violence- subtle, psychic, emotional or silent an individual goes through are received by a body. It is a body that is put through cornering, insult, neglect and deprived of autonomy, made to sit and eat in a corner, to open their shoes, walk barefoot or work relentlessly. Hence, all forms of violence are violence on the body, the body is the individual. But surprisingly for women even the bodies are not their own. Is the conditioning of violence not changing in rural India? Yes, it is, but at a much slower pace than the numerical growth or figures indicating overall development of the nation. Also, the fact that women are the perpetrators of the above-mentioned form of violence by upholding or repeating stereotypical division of labour is what makes it hard to evade, because it is not the 'men' who are directly perpetrating violence rather 'women' fed by the control mechanisms set by 'men' who for their personal empowerment continue control. In both glimpses mentioned above the mother-in-law is the one who sees to stringent following of rules leading to oppression or normalisation of oppression on daily basis.

### **Ot(her)Voices**

Shefali Bauri (57 years, name changed) is a resident of Sonathali village, Block Kashipur

has been working in the households of Banerjee(s) for the last fifty years. She was five or seven when she was married off to the neighbouring village of Bhalukgajar. She does not remember the exact age of her marriage but does remember that her father kept on reminding her that when inquired by the in-laws she should state that it is five years only. Having born in house without any hospital facility, Shefali never had the birth certificate that the grandchildren of her extended family now hold. She never went to school. She played and stayed with her parents for some time after marriage and then was sent off, and as she narrates it was in the month her first menstrual cycle began. Soon after, her only dead-child was born; her husband expired a few months later and she came back to this parental village. Her entire life it seems has been spent working in the households and fields owned by the Banerjee's, who are an upper caste landed gentry; she works both as the house help and as a share cropper in their fields with her brothers. As a help her work is 'unclean', she cleans the cow shed, courtyard, washes clothes, utensils and mops the floors of the household. At times if demanded or ordered, she will cut vegetables and keep them aside without washing them or without water. The violence in this sort of interaction is denial of dignity to a human being. She cannot touch any woman of the household while performing the afore mentioned activities, her touch is considered to be dirty or impure, particularly if it is related with water. For example, if she chops vegetables and washes them after, then those would not be touched or taken by the household, they need to be dry; which is why she would refrain from chopping vegetables which cannot be further dipped in water once they have been chopped, as okra or lady finger (which would become mushy if washed, when cooked, especially in the Bengali way). Before the reader understands this as about food it needs to be noticed that it is not about cooking tradition or method where alternatives can be suggested, rather it is about a deep-seated belief in the idea of a touch having the power to unclean bodies, homes and things. In a similar instance another family in the same village does not touch washed utensils until they are sun dried and no water remains in them, in case if any specific utensil that has just been washed by the lower caste maid is needed urgently then, either any male member of the house re-washes it with water or the women themselves pour some water over it without touching and then use. The

present author would again point out that it is not about the detailing or intricacies of how the cleaning is done, but rather the fact that what is unclean or dirty is varyingly located in value-identities. The processes of such cleaning are dehumanising in the sense that they snatch away the human agency from 'humans' are told that they are located in the lower rungs of the caste hierarchy. This being told comes to become their reality, something that they believe in, and have thus normalised and internalised the attitude that they face every day. So, what is 'dehumanising' or violence against human entity for the present researcher is 'only normal' for the ones facing it, as it has been going on for ages and coated with cultural traditions and norms. Another intriguing fact is that there are changes and alternates that are happening to this situation- the new generation of workers. These are youngsters of the family who are getting educated under governmental schemes and reservation policies. They chose not to enter in professions that take them into the 'insides' of the upper caste households because that is where these ways of caste atrocities function and work. Constitutional prerogatives, political and financial literacy and more specifically awareness about basic rights as a citizen has raised a voice against such acts in the public sphere, but in the more private spheres of the house these acts continue. So, Shefali Bauri (name changed) who works in the household of the Banerjee's is not allowed to help the daughter-in-law in cooking food even though it would reduce work load of the latter or even if the former intends to be helpful. In a conversation with the researcher Shefali (name changed) opened up on how physically challenging it has become for her to continue working as an agricultural labour and that chores related to the insides of the house like washing and cleaning are comparatively easy on her body but the machines like washing machine and vacuum cleaner are replacing her labour. Which for her indicates that soon she will be out of work or her income may reduce as extra chores meant extra income, if she could stay in this household as a maid, it would ensure good pay for some more years. She mentioned how the matriarch of the house would not entertain such provisions of Shefali (name changed) helping in everyday clean chores even though the young daughter-in-law would have appreciated it. This is the loop whereby more and more youths of such villages belonging to so called 'lower' castes move out of such settlements into places

where heterogeneous living is so incorporated that the only commonality becomes the need to earn more money rather than essentialising caste identities. All the encounters mentioned as of now are not incidences of physical atrocities but when has violence been only physical? It is this mere normalisation of other non-violent acts of discriminations that have caused us to understand violence as only physical abuse in everyday life. This researcher would intend to deviate the attention of the readers to documentations of violence in Africa, such as the one talked about by El-Zanaty et al. (1996) in Egypt, where beating by husband comes across in huge numbers. The larger incorporation of all discriminations and prejudices as violence has not yet occurred to the ones suffering it in general and there is a generation gap to that. Shefali Bauri's (name changed) nephew works 'outside' (she does not know where) as a labour and sends money home, which is why his wife refuses to join as a maid in the houses of the upper caste gentry as a maid doing the unclean job of cleaning the daily dirt of clothes and utensils or cow sheds. She stays at home and in the sowing season joins to work alongside other labours in the fields only. Another young woman named Sarala Dom (27 years of age, name changed) belonging to the Dom caste, that is the ones who help in cremating bodies is neither allowed to nor chooses to work as maid rather she insists on working as a wage worker in government projects of building roads or as a help to masons building houses and so. The increasing number of brick kilns have employed the most of young ones who are here working with others of similar caste backgrounds under the supervision of upper caste and upper classed man who does not mind the caste binary or as Sarala (name changed) says is a man and hence can choose to adhere to rules of caste-based discriminations when he feels like or move away when he feels so. Sarala (name changed) too complains of the matriarchal voice that echoes in from within the houses that reduces them to only the castes they are born into and not of their contributions made as individuals. Sarala (name changed) narrates how every time they enter the houses of the 'upper' castes there is a scan of who she is, and immediately mentions how her mother-in-law and her aunts or mother consider it to be only normal that the women of the upper castes intend to keep their traditional values intact. So, caste identity works in two ways- for the upper caste women matriarch it is a tool by



which she intends to hold up honour and for the lower caste their identity is a result of their past life *karma* so they cannot complain. The other way that this works is the ones who resist or deviate from such panopticon coils of caste, who do not intend to see caste as an omnipresent essential qualifier of who they are rather they view themselves as individuals who have varying needs and for that need to be fulfilled caste identities can be and should be buried. But other than caste-based dilemmas and audacities these women often face violence in different forms in their own houses. Not physical though, as they claim (respondents often did not respond to conversations on physical violence on themselves). Also, it needs to be mentioned that caste-based discriminations as to what is allowed and what not is very localised and often depends on the village norms. The village or localities with stricter control mechanisms are often suffocating for the ones who are not able to abide by them. In these scenarios first generation working women experience othering at the cost of being called employed. Employment means working extra time in both at home and office, also it comes with behaviours of being cornered at various stages. To communities that have not witnessed the presence of women in work places it seems challenging and unsettling; specially in cases where they are the first generations moving out for work every day in an organised sector which means that the times are stricter and lesser flexibility. Dayamoyi Banerjee (27 years, name changed) who is working as a health staff states how demanding it is to pre-plan every meal and organise other chores so that she could still be called a good wife and an average worker. Dayamoyi (name changed) herself has no higher ambition of excelling at work or proving her efficiency instead always has back loads of incomplete registers and documentations. When the present researcher mentioned that this may cause a slow bureaucracy, Dayamoyi (name changed) had no answer; instead pointed out that the work pressure is at its maximum. But what needs to be understood is that change in this belt will come only slowly and with change in the insides of the house because by the time she reaches the office she is exhausted, she is apologising for the trainings she is undergoing and the absences caused in her home. So, violence does not always incur wife beating it is also engrossed in acts of guilt formation, otherising, cornering and silent treatments in one's own house, as that is how the girls

are oriented to believe in patriarchal set ups where marriage results in migration to in-law's residences. Dayamoyi (name changed) mentions about another married colleague of her who faces dominance everyday by her great grandmother-in-law only and not by her mother-in-law as she herself works as staff in the *anganwari* centres of her village as a cook. This respondent named Balika Das (32 years, name changed) belongs to the general caste but are *bairagi* in community who are much lower in their rungs; according to the Hindu varna system they belong to the Shudra but are not untouchables or scheduled castes. It needs to be clarified that all the communities belonging to the extended Shudra varna do not necessarily fall into the untouchable category. Balika Das (name changed) details on her poverty as being the only reason for which she moves out of the house every day to her job it pays her modestly of course but this is existential need for her family which once faced dire hunger. Balika (name changed) whose husband does not have any regular job and ends up drinking alcohol whatever he earns has been accused of beating his wife. Balika (name changed) mentions that she was beaten every day when she herself was thirty or so, but as she grew old the physical violence has reduced but the verbal abuse exists even now in the hands of her mother-in-law and her husband. Balika also states that since they are not economically well-off like the Banerjee households so there is not much detail cooking that needs to be performed. There is not much to cook. She cooks the rice and fries' fish when they occasionally buy some or get a good catch in their nearby pond and the daughter-in-law who is also employed prepares the breakfast and one vegetarian gravy dish for the lunch and her own tiffin or so. Balika (name changed) complaints of how cooperative she is as a mother-in-law who allows the later to work; so, the idea of what violation or violence is very different from the urban notions of it. Caste, income and marital status locate the definition of violence.

### **The 'Matriarch'**

In the field work that this paper entailed, and in the village this researcher studied, matriarch is a woman who has birthed a son or more, as that forms the basic criteria to hold power- birthing a son; it needs to be mentioned that when this researcher stated about a man's role in chromosomes and how that detrimental it is, she was brushed off

or laughed off more. One respondent aged Sima Das (67 years, name changed) belonging to *bairagi* community, scheduled castes but not treated as untouchables in this village, claimed that a visit to a nearby temple has helped her birth two sons and it is the same for her daughters-in-law whom she forced to go to that particular temple after they got married and she believes that, that is how they conceived early and birthed boys. For Sima Das it is a happy household though there are often fights between the sons regarding property of whatever little they have, and both the sons might soon end up having separate kitchens or kitchen hours along with their wives and children, while residing in the same house, but that does not matter. She further adds that her first born is a daughter and her own mother-in-law would perpetually hurl slurs for birthing a girl child who is around 50 years of age now and has a family of her own residing in the adjoining block of Hura. Sima Das added that with visits to temple there are other cautions she took like the position of moon which according to her determines the sex of the fetus. This is not about the indigenous practices that existed much before medical advancement in controlling woman's body but the sheer epistemology that there has to be ways to control a woman's body and subjectivity so that patriarchy can be hoisted. Any woman choosing differently or undermining such ways do not come near the ladder of power or the hold to the position of the matriarch. What power does a matriarch have? To the outsider she is just the one voicing oppression but to her own family she does decide upon the minor decision making and the major ones like buying land or vehicle are decided upon by her husband or sons and she does agree to whatever decisions she takes going against her daughters -in-law many at times. So, it is not power but the appearance of it that makes her a matriarch; it is because no other woman in her family is yet to challenge her authority that she thrones herself to be one. To this researcher what stood out be the violation of intimacy is the fact that intimate decisions of family planning between partners or the decision to become a mother are non-existent because these do not come with choices that can be decided or brooded upon, these are mandates that come with the timeline of as soon as possible. Her younger daughter-in-law was suggesting about delaying motherhood three years ago right after she got married and came to this household; but the former made sure that she does comply to

what has to be done and on time; no use of physical violence, none at all she claims, but yes, they did not talk to her properly for months and threatened to send her back. Now, this stands out as one of the most heard of responses that this field gave- it is the sheer fear of being sent off to one's parental family which acts like a threat and often finds women following the dictates. These young women are not illiterate or unskilled or at fault but what makes them comply are the sheer fear of ostracization and shame of labelling that comes with being ousted from the new found patri-virilocal family. Rarely ever do these women quit from their roles as wives and mothers, until their own father steps in to stop physical violence (because other forms of violence and marginalisation like emotional abuse or subtle violences like not talking, misbehaving and so are often not understood by anyone as violence other than the person bearing it, who also often normalises it as the only way the in-laws are expected to behave) or chooses to take her away in cases of infidelity or unfaithful husband and so. In another response a young girl aged 23 years, Dhanasri Mallik belonging to the *vashyi* community and general caste category declared that she is married to a well-off family of Mukherjee's, residing in Adra which is the nearest town of about 20kms in distance, her husband is a school teacher and she herself is a graduate; but she has been staying with her parents for the last one year after her daughter's birth. She clarifies that her in-laws did not force her to stay here with her parents but she herself refrains from going to their place because she believes that she could not make them happy by birthing a girl. She agrees that it is not her fault, and that in this age of empowerment women are not a burden but years of internalising androcentric culture transmitted to her by her parents and grandparents and relatives, friends, peer groups have firmly grounded the root that birthing a boy is the highest form of empowerment probably more empowering than a job or earning employment. In this case there is more than violence there is a believe that she herself could have done better or needs to perform better by birthing a boy next time that she conceives. So, conceiving is almost like a sacred duty performed with utmost vigour and not by choice of responsibility sharing and so. What is more violent than violence is the belief that the victim has of her worth in being eligible only for violence or as that being her only fate. It is how the victim accepts violence instead of voicing against it.

This paper does not claim in its micro-sociological purview that the above-mentioned scenarios prevail everywhere or that none raise voices, or even that the law of the nation is absent about it. The attempt here is to identify that violence works in various ways and one such way is accepting it as 'normal', internalising it and passing it on to the next generation as norm and culture. Violence sustains itself by creating the fear of ostracization, labelling, otherization and the prize or award if following the norms is deification into the sacrificial mother and other idealised roles which often acts as impetus for women to follow suit and marginalise those who want dignity and deviate.

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## Invisible Wounds, Silent Sufferings: Health Implications of Psychological Violence on Married Women in Basirhat Block- 2<sup>1</sup>

Sabnur Sanam Kamini<sup>2</sup>

Psychological violence is often the invisible part of domestic abuse—no bruises, no fractures, just a slow wearing away of a woman's sense of self. This study set out to understand how that violence shapes the lives and health of married women in Basirhat Block 2, a region in West Bengal where poverty, environmental stress, and conservative gender norms intersect. I worked with 100 women across four-gram panchayats, using surveys and in-depth interviews to get both the numbers and the stories behind them. What I found was both expected and deeply unsettling. Psychological abuse—verbal humiliation, isolation, financial control, emotional manipulation—was widespread. Eighty percent of the women I spoke to reported chronic anxiety; 62% had trouble sleeping; 40% showed signs of depression. But what struck me more than the numbers was how ordinary this violence had become. Many women did not call it violence at all. They called it “his nature,” “my fate,” or simply “how marriage is.” The patterns were not the same for everyone. Women from Scheduled Caste backgrounds, Muslim women, and those in the poorest households faced the most severe abuse and the worst health outcomes. Their stories made it clear that psychological violence is not random; it feeds on existing inequalities—caste, class, religion—and uses them to tighten its grip. This study argues that psychological violence needs to be taken as seriously as physical abuse. That means not just laws on paper, but accessible mental health support, economic opportunities for women, and—perhaps hardest of all—a shift in how communities understand marriage, control, and a woman's right to dignity. Until then, too many women will continue carrying an invisible wound that no one sees and no one treats.

**Keywords:** psychological violence, women's health, marital abuse, gender inequality, intersectionality

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When we talk about domestic violence, the image that usually comes to mind is physical—bruises, broken bones, visible marks. That is what makes headlines, what shocks us, what we can point to and condemn. But during the months I spent in Basirhat Block 2, I kept encountering something harder to name, harder to see, yet arguably more damaging: psychological violence. It lived in the silences, the tight control of money, the words that cut deeper than any fist. And it was so woven into everyday life that many women did not even call it violence. They called it “his nature,” “my fate,” or simply “how things are.” I came to this research with a background in social science and a conviction that domestic abuse is never just private trouble—it is shaped by poverty, caste, religion, and the social rules that govern marriage (Crenshaw, 1989; Dube, 1997). But I was not prepared for how ordinary psychological violence would seem in the villages of Basirhat Block 2. Located in the Sundarbans delta, this is a region where livelihoods are fragile: seasonal floods, soil salinity, and uncertain wages keep families on edge. Social norms are conservative, particularly around women’s mobility and conduct. The idea that a woman should adjust, tolerate, and sacrifice for her family is not just a saying; it is a lived expectation. I chose Basirhat Block 2 precisely because of these layered vulnerabilities (as observed in the region’s environmental and social context). I wanted to understand how psychological violence operates in a setting where poverty, environmental stress, and rigid gender roles intersect. The question was not simply “how common is it?” but “what does it do to women’s bodies and minds, and why is it so hard to challenge?” The study that follows is based on 100 surveys and 20 in-depth interviews with married women across four-gram panchayats – Shrinagar Metia, Ghorarash Kulingram, Begumpur Bibipur, Kholapota. It is not a neat, detached academic exercise.

I went into the field expecting to measure prevalence and health impacts, but I came away with something messier and more urgent: a sense of how psychological violence quietly dismantles personhood, how it becomes normalized (Foucault, 1978; Stark, 2007), and how its health consequences are suffered in silence because there is no one to listen—or because women have learned that no one will believe them.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Understanding psychological violence demands more than counting its occurrences; it requires a lens that can capture the tangled power relations in which it is rooted. As I conducted this research, I realized that the experiences recounted by the women of Basirhat Block 2 could not be fully explained through any single theoretical framework. Instead, I began to examine several theories side-by-side—at times they intertwined, at others they appeared somewhat contradictory—yet, when viewed collectively, they revealed the silent mechanism of control that had woven itself into the fabric of their lives.

## **Intersectionality**

The first theoretical lens that was simply impossible to overlook was Kimberly Crenshaw's (1989) concept of 'intersectionality.' On paper, the idea is quite straightforward: oppression never operates along a single, linear trajectory. However, when I sat face-to-face with these women, I witnessed this reality unfolding before my very eyes in their daily lives. A woman's vulnerability to psychological abuse was never solely a consequence of her being a 'woman.' Rather, it was inextricably intertwined with her caste, religion, skin color, economic status, age, or marital standing—and it was the convergence of all these factors that created the complex web within which they found themselves rendered helpless. A young widow (SC) who had remarried into a slightly better-off family, told me, "My mother-in-law says I bring bad luck because of my caste. My husband repeats it when he is angry. They think I should be grateful they took me in." Her story echoed many others: caste stigma, poverty, and gender combined to make the abuse seem almost deserved—a logic that the women themselves sometimes internalised. Intersectionality helped me see that these women were not facing "more" violence; they were facing a qualitatively different kind of entrapment, where escape routes were blocked by multiple, overlapping walls.

## **Coercive Control**

Through interviews, I learned of certain incidents—actions that the women themselves did not necessarily perceive as "violence," yet which they reported caused them



significant mental distress due to their husbands' behavior. Examples include: Monitoring whom they spoke to while at the tube well or by the pond; providing only a meager allowance and subsequently interrogating them over every penny spent; humiliating them by hurling plates if the cooking was deemed unsatisfactory; or, at times, maintaining a week-long silence following an argument.

Evan Stark's (2007) concept of "coercive control" resonates here with unsettling precision. Stark argues that this form of violence is not merely an occasional outburst of rage, but rather a calculated strategy that gradually erodes a woman's capacity for independence—rendering her dependent. I observed this pattern in the behavior of husbands in Basirhat. Their grip extended beyond financial matters; they exerted tight control even over the most mundane aspects of daily life. Let me share the story of one woman, named Rehana. Her husband controlled even her access to a mobile phone. Rehana recounted, "He doesn't allow me to use a personal mobile phone of my own. If I need to make a call, I have to use my husband's phone." She added, "I love wearing sarees, but whether I am inside the house or stepping out, I am compelled to wear a *burqa*—specifically so that no one else can see me. "There are no shouts here, no overt threats. Instead, women's lives are brought under control, little by little. The theory of coercive control provided me with the precise language to articulate this specific form of suffering—what Stark describes as the crime of liberty deprivation: an offense that unfolds in plain sight, yet remains invisible to all.

### **The Cycle of Violence**

Many participants in the interviews shared a specific experience: although their husbands sometimes behave abusively, they subsequently act kindly; consequently, the women themselves are confused as to whether this behavior truly constitutes domestic violence. For instance, consider a scenario where, over a particular issue, the household is gripped from morning till night by intense verbal abuse, shouting, occasional throwing of objects, and—at times—physical violence against the wife. Yet, the very next morning, it is as if nothing at all had happened. That anger is suddenly replaced by affectionate behavior. Let me share Sumita's story. She recounted, "One day, he threw my clothes

around and subjected me to a barrage of verbal abuse. The very next morning, immediately upon waking up, he placed a cup of tea in my hands. He spoke in such an affectionate tone that it felt as though the events of the previous day had never occurred. This is the trap. For, while sipping that tea, Sumita begins to think: He isn't a bad man—just a bit short-tempered. Look how well he is treating me today. But a few days later, the tension returns, followed by another outburst. Thus, the cycle continues. It is this tiny glimmer of hope that repeatedly draws these women back to the very same place. For they find it incredibly difficult to accept—let alone come to terms with—the fact that the husband who serves tea and the husband who throws objects are, in reality, one and the same person. This pattern was so common that I began to anticipate it in the interviews. Lenore Walker's (1979) cycle of violence—tension-building, acute explosion, honeymoon—helped me understand why women stayed. It was not just economic dependence or social pressure; it was the honeymoon phase that planted a stubborn seed of hope. "He is not always bad," women would say, and they meant it. That hope, I realised, is not a weakness but a survival mechanism, one that the cycle exploits to keep them bound.

### **Discourse and the Making of a "Burden"**

A final theoretical thread came from the words women repeated back to me. Over and over, they used the same phrases to describe themselves: "burden," "good-for-nothing," "shameless." These were not their own descriptions; they were the words their husbands had spoken to them, often for years. It reminded me of Foucault's (1978) argument that power is not just repressive but productive—it creates the very subjects it governs. In this case, psychological violence was doing something more than hurting feelings. It was constructing an identity. A woman who is told daily that she is incapable, that her cooking is useless, that she should be grateful for being fed—she begins to inhabit that identity. One respondent, Anjali, said quietly, "Sometimes I think maybe he is right. I can't do anything properly. I am a burden." Her voice was not angry; it was exhausted. Discourse theory helped me see that the verbal abuse was not noise but a slow, methodical shaping of a self that would not resist.

## **Weaving Theories Together**

None of these frameworks alone would have been sufficient. Intersectionality reminded me to look at the layered inequalities; coercive control directed my attention to the strategies, not just the incidents; the cycle of violence explained the emotional pull that kept women tethered; and discourse theory illuminated how the violence reached into the very sense of self. In the field, these dimensions were not separate—they played out simultaneously, in the same household, often in the same moment. I do not present this as a neat synthesis. There were tensions: some women's experiences fit the cycle less neatly, others described control that was not strategic but chaotic. But holding these theories together loosely allowed me to listen more carefully—to hear not just what happened, but how power operated through the everyday, the unsaid, and the worn-down spirit.

## **Methodology**

### **Study Area and Sampling: Choosing Basirhat Block 2**

I chose Basirhat Block 2 not because it was easy to work in, but because the region's layered vulnerabilities made the question of psychological violence urgent. Basirhat Block-II is primarily a low-lying, riverine, and border-adjacent area marked by rivers, canals, and wetlands. During the monsoon season, waterlogging, river erosion, crop damage, and recurring environmental vulnerabilities make livelihoods highly unstable. Since many families are dependent on agriculture, economic losses resulting from environmental crises intensify stress within households. This financial anxiety often manifests through patriarchal domination in the form of physical, psychological, and economic violence against women. Thus, environmental insecurity directly contributes to the social conditions that normalize domestic violence. Due to limited local employment opportunities, many men from this region migrate to other Indian states such as Kerala, Delhi, Maharashtra, Gujarat, and various industrial regions in South India to work as migrant laborers. Prolonged separation from families frequently generates emotional distance, mistrust, psychological alienation, and controlling behavior within marital relationships. Even while living away, many husbands continue to exercise

authority over their wives through economic control and constant surveillance via phone communication. In several cases, upon returning home, frustrations accumulated from exploitative labor conditions and social humiliation are displaced onto women through violent or aggressive behavior. Migration also creates a dual burden for women. On one hand, women are compelled to manage households, childcare, elder care, and financial responsibilities in the absence of their husbands. On the other hand, society subjects them to heightened scrutiny regarding morality, “honor,” and social conduct. As a result, women often face social surveillance, emotional abuse from in-laws, and suspicion regarding their character. These forms of control frequently operate as psychological violence, which remains invisible yet deeply damaging.

Socially, it is a mix of Muslim and Hindu communities, with varying caste hierarchies, and gender norms tend to be conservative. Women’s mobility is often restricted, and speaking about marital problems outside the home is still seen as bringing shame.

But there is another, darker layer to this region’s social fabric—one that I could not ignore once I learned about it. Local residents and field participants repeatedly referred to the presence of trafficking networks and nearby red-light areas Matia, which shaped community anxieties surrounding girls’ safety and marriage.”. Behind its narrow lanes operates an underworld of trafficking—women and children, moved like commodities, often without any trace. This reality casts a long shadow over the entire block. For families here, the fear is not abstract. They know that a girl who is not “settled” in marriage might be vulnerable to being picked up, lured, or forcibly taken into that network. In such an environment, early marriage is not simply a tradition; it is seen as a desperate form of protection. Families marry off their daughters as young as possible—sometimes before they turn eighteen—believing that a husband’s home is a safe haven. Yet that same “protection” becomes a trap. These child brides are handed over to families where they have no economic standing, no education to fall back on, and often no voice. They become financially dependent on their husbands and in-laws from the moment they enter the marital home. And when psychological violence begins—as it so often does—they have nowhere to go. Their own families, having married them off for safety, are

reluctant to take them back; doing so would be seen as admitting failure, and more practically, it would bring the unmarried or separated daughter back into a space where the threat of trafficking looms again. So, the very system designed to protect them ends up locking them into abusive marriages. This cycle—fear of trafficking → early marriage → economic dependency → domestic violence → silence—became a recurring thread in the stories I collected.

I wanted to listen to women from all backgrounds. Therefore, I selected my sample from four Gram Panchayats using a stratified random sampling method. First, I randomly selected a few villages from each Panchayat. Then, within those villages, I selected households at regular intervals—approximately every few houses. I conducted my study on 100 married women using purposive and snowball sampling. From a statistical standpoint, this does not represent a perfectly precise snapshot of the entire region; rather, it constitutes a mixed sample reflecting a diverse range of experiences. The field data for this study were collected between January 2025 and December 2025. In order to conduct an ethnographic survey, multiple visits were made to the selected villages at different times throughout the study period. For the collection of data through questionnaires, six visits were conducted in each Gram Panchayat over a period of three months, maintaining an interval of fifteen days between each visit. Altogether, a total of 24 field visits were undertaken during the course of the research.

## **Data Collection**

### **Questionnaires (survey)**

To collect data, I designed a questionnaire comprising both open-ended and closed-ended questions. The questions fell into five categories: age, address, and social status; followed by various forms of psychological abuse—verbal insults, social isolation, intimidation, financial control, and attempts at emotional manipulation – forms of abuse widely recognized within the literature on domestic violence and coercive control (Stark, 2007; World Health Organization [WHO], 2005). Additionally, I inquired about their physical and mental health. The Auxiliary Nurse Midwives (ANMs) and ASHA workers from the local health centers provided me with invaluable assistance in data collection.

Primarily acting on leads provided by them, I would visit the victims' homes. Since the health workers offered reassurance, the victims felt neither fear nor shame; consequently, they spoke to me candidly about their experiences with domestic violence. I went door-to-door personally to conduct interviews in private settings. Most of the time, I would sit in the courtyard, ensuring that no other family members were within earshot. If a woman preferred not to be interviewed in her own home, we would sit in a neighbor's house instead.

### **In-depth interviews**

From the group of 100 women who participated in the surveys, I selected 20 for detailed, in-depth conversations. I endeavored to select a diverse group, representing a variety of ages, castes, religions, and experiences of abuse. The conversations were not rigidly structured. I had prepared a list of topics in advance, but I used this merely as a guide or framework; I did not adhere to a script of specific, pre-formulated questions. I had intended to speak for an hour at a time, but often, our conversations would stretch to an hour and a half. At first, the women would offer only brief, concise answers. Then—either by remaining silent or by gently probing for a little more information—I would encourage them to begin unfolding their entire stories. Occasionally, they would pause mid-sentence to glance around, checking to see if anyone was listening; then, they would resume speaking in hushed tones. I recorded these conversations only after obtaining their permission. However, three of the women declined to be recorded; in their cases, I simply took notes in a notebook. I gave them my word that I would keep their names and addresses confidential, and I have used pseudonyms to protect their identities. Even so, some of them made specific requests: “Please do not mention the name of my village, nor should you write down what my husband does for a living.” I honored those requests as well.

### **Data Analysis: Between Numbers and Stories**

#### **Quantitative analysis**

I entered survey data into Excel and analysed it using descriptive statistics—frequencies,

percentages, cross-tabulations by caste, religion, and income. I kept the analysis relatively simple because the sample size was modest, and I was more interested in patterns than in generalising to a larger population. The tables in the results section are the outcome of that work. But I must admit: the numbers sometimes felt cold. A percentage like “80% reported chronic anxiety” is stark, but it did not convey the tremor in a woman’s voice when she said “my heart is always racing.” So I made a point of letting the qualitative data speak alongside the numbers.

### **Qualitative analysis**

I transcribed the interviews verbatim and translated them into English. Transcription was slow—I had to listen to the pauses, the sighs, the words that were almost whispered. For analysis, I used thematic coding, loosely following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) approach. I read through transcripts multiple times, noting recurring ideas: “normalisation of control,” “silence as survival,” “health as a site of suffering,” “the limits of kinship.” These themes did not emerge neatly; they overlapped and sometimes contradicted each other. One woman would say she had no one to turn to, and then in the next sentence mention a sister who visited secretly. I coded those as “contradictions in support,” because they mattered.

I did the coding manually, with coloured pens and sticky notes. I tried using qualitative software at first, but it felt too detached—I needed to sit with the paper, to see the women’s words on the page, to be able to move them around physically. That might sound unsystematic, but it helped me stay close to the data.

### **Results**

The results section is where numbers and stories meet. I have organised it around the three main themes that emerged from the data: the prevalence and forms of psychological violence; the health consequences; and the intersecting vulnerabilities of caste, religion, and class. I present the quantitative findings in tables, but I weave in the qualitative voices that give those numbers meaning.

How Common Is Psychological Violence? When I first asked women whether they had experienced psychological abuse, many hesitated. The word “violence” did not fit their experience. But as I read out specific behaviours—being insulted, having money controlled, being isolated from family—the responses changed. By the end of the survey, it was clear that psychological violence was nearly universal in this sample.

**Table 1: Forms of psychological violence**

|                        |     |
|------------------------|-----|
| Verbal humiliation     | 78% |
| Emotional manipulation | 68% |
| Financial control      | 60% |
| Isolation              | 55% |
| Threats                | 40% |

Source: Field Survey

These numbers are stark, but they flatten the experience. When I asked Rupa, 32-year-old mother of two, about verbal humiliation, she did not just say yes. She said: “He calls me haramzadi in front of the children. If the rice is a little hard, he throws the plate and says, ‘Can you do nothing right? You are only good for eating my food.’” The public nature of the humiliation—the children witnessing, the neighbours hearing—mattered. It was not just an insult; it was a performance of control. Financial control was similarly pervasive. Sixty percent of women said they had no say in major household purchases or were denied money even for necessities. One woman, Malati, explained: “I have to ask for every single rupee, even for medicine. If I ask too often, he says I am greedy, that I only care about money.” The denial was not just about scarcity; it was about making her feel undeserving. Isolation was reported by 55% of women. Fatima’s story stayed with me: “My mother lives only two villages away. But he says, ‘Why do you need to go there? You have work here. Are you going to complain about me?’ When I go to the tube well, he asks the neighbours how long I was gone.” Over time, she had stopped



visiting her mother, stopped talking to neighbours, stopped going anywhere without his permission. Her world had shrunk to the walls of her home.

### Health Impacts: The Body as a Witness

The health data was, for me, the most disturbing part of the study. Women were not just describing emotional pain; they were reporting physical symptoms that aligned closely with chronic stress, trauma, anxiety and depression (Krug et al., 2002; WHO, 2005).

**Table 2 : Self-reported health outcomes**

|                         |     |
|-------------------------|-----|
| Chronic stress /anxiety | 80% |
| Sleep disorder          | 62% |
| Frequent headaches      | 50% |
| Symptom of depression   | 40% |

Source: Field Survey

These numbers are high, but the narratives gave them weight. Malati, who had described her anxiety as “a snake coiled in my stomach,” elaborated: “My heart is always racing. I never know what mood he will be in when he returns from work. The fear is always inside me. I cannot eat, I cannot sleep. I just lie there, staring at the ceiling, waiting for the next storm.” That was not a figure of speech; it was a description of hyper-vigilance, of living in a state of constant threat. Sleep disorders affected 62% of women. Anjali, a 22-year-old newlywed, said: “I lie awake most nights. I think about what I did wrong, what I will do wrong tomorrow. Sometimes I hear him moving in the next room and I freeze.” Her body was alert even when she tried to rest. Symptoms of depression—persistent sadness, loss of interest, hopelessness—were reported by 40% of women. One woman, who asked not to be named, said: “I sit and cry for no reason. I used to like cooking, now I just do it because I have to. I feel like I am in a deep well, and everyone is standing at the top, but no one can see me.” That image of being unseen, of suffering in plain sight, recurred across interviews.

### Intersecting Vulnerabilities: Caste, Religion, and Class

The survey data made it clear that psychological violence was not evenly distributed. Women from Scheduled Caste (SC) backgrounds, Muslim women, and those from low-income households reported higher rates of abuse and worse health outcomes.

**Table 3: Relation between forms of violence and caste**

| Form of violence   | General caste n=(30) | OBC n=(40) | SC n=(30) |
|--------------------|----------------------|------------|-----------|
| Verbal humiliation | 70%                  | 80%        | 90%       |
| Isolation          | 50%                  | 55%        | 65%       |
| Financial control  | 53%                  | 60%        | 70%       |
| Threats            | 30%                  | 40%        | 50%       |

Source: Field Survey

The pattern was consistent: SC women faced the highest rates across all forms. When I interviewed SC women, the abuse was often laced with caste slurs. One woman told me: “My mother-in-law says I bring bad luck because of my caste. My husband repeats it when he is angry. They think I should be grateful they took me in.” The intersection of caste and gender created a double bind: she was seen as inferior both as a woman and as a member of a lower caste (Crenshaw, 1989).

**Table 4 : Health symptoms by Religion**

| Health Symptom           | Hindu (n=60) | Muslim (n=40) |
|--------------------------|--------------|---------------|
| Chronic stress / anxiety | 80%          | 85%           |
| Sleep disorders          | 60%          | 65%           |
| Frequent headaches       | 48%          | 52%           |
| Symptoms of depression   | 38%          | 45%           |

Source: Field Survey

While rates were high in both groups, Muslim women reported slightly higher levels across most indicators. The difference was not statistically significant, but it pointed to a trend worth noting. In interviews, Muslim women sometimes mentioned that their communities were more closely knit, which could mean both support and surveillance. One Muslim woman said: “Here, everyone knows everything. If I go out, someone will tell my husband. It is like being watched all the time.” The pressure to uphold family honour was intense, and leaving the marriage was almost unthinkable.

**Table 5 : Role of Economic Vulnerability**

| Mental Health Impact     | Low Income (<₹5,000)<br>(n=50) | Middle Income (₹5,000–<br>₹10,000) (n=35) | High Income (><br>₹10,000) (n=15) |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Chronic stress / anxiety | 90%                            | 74%                                       | 67%                               |
| Symptoms of depression   | 48%                            | 34%                                       | 27%                               |
| Suicidal thoughts        | 30%                            | 14%                                       | 7%                                |

Source: Field Survey

The numbers speak for themselves: poverty magnified everything. Women in low-income households were more anxious, more depressed, and more likely to have considered suicide. One woman, Sumita, said: “If I leave, where will I go? I have no money, no education. My father is dead, my brother has his own family. I would be on the street.” Economic dependence was not just a background condition; it was the rope that bound her to the abuse. Patterns Across Experiences- What struck me as I moved between the survey data and the interview transcripts was how the same patterns kept appearing, across different villages, different castes, different ages. The specific insults varied, but the structure was similar: a husband who controlled money, restricted movement, used words to belittle, and created an atmosphere of unpredictability. And the health effects— anxiety, sleeplessness, headaches, despair—were eerily consistent. But there were also variations that mattered. For SC women, the abuse had a caste edge. For Muslim women,

communal boundaries sometimes intensified isolation. For the poorest women, there was literally no exit. These variations reinforced what intersectional theory suggests: vulnerability is not a uniform experience (Crenshaw, 1989).

## Discussion

When I reviewed the data, one thing became abundantly clear: for these women, this form of psychological abuse had become so normalized that they themselves failed to recognize it for what it truly was. The survey statistics tell a compelling story: 94% of women had experienced psychological abuse at least once within the past year, and 80% were suffering from chronic anxiety. However, the true nature of the situation only became apparent when I listened to their personal stories. Hidden within those narratives was not merely a series of isolated incidents, but an entire system of control. One mother remarked, "All husbands are like this. It was simply my fate." Another woman, Anjali, spoke in a voice heavy with exhaustion: "Sometimes I feel he is right. I can't seem to do anything correctly. I am nothing but a burden." There was no anger in her tone—only emptiness. Hearing these words sent shivers down my own spine.

What was most distressing was the frequent refrain from mothers-in-law or neighbors: "It was just a minor spat; just learn to cope. Better to have a difficult husband than a broken home." This single sentence speaks volumes. Here, psychological abuse is not merely endured; it persists—and indeed thrives—with the tacit blessing of society itself. The theoretical frameworks underpinning my research (such as Stark's concept of "Coercive Control") helped me understand that this is not merely a manifestation of irrational rage, but rather a calculated strategy (Stark, 2007). Husbands exert control over every aspect of their wives' lives—finances, freedom of movement, and social relationships. As one woman put it, "I have to beg him for money just to buy my own medication."

However, not every incident is part of a calculated scheme. Sometimes, the abuse stems from alcohol consumption or sudden, impulsive outbursts of anger. In other cases, it manifests as a gradual, years-long erosion of self-worth—a process devoid of any discernible cycles of ups and downs, characterized only by a monotonous weariness

and profound neglect.

My role extends beyond merely presenting statistical results. I have, in a sense, become a witness to their suffering. The statistics reveal the breadth of the problem; the personal stories reveal its depth. And taken together, they make one thing abundantly clear: psychological abuse is no trivial matter. It is a massive, destructive force that fundamentally alters the lives of women—and its devastating impact on their health is an issue we must address with the utmost urgency.

### **Health: The Body Remembers**

The health findings were the hardest to process. The rates—80% chronic anxiety, 62% sleep disorders, 40% symptoms of depression—were alarming, but the embodied descriptions were worse. Women described their anxiety as “a snake coiled in my stomach,” their sadness as “being in a deep well with no one seeing.” These were not metaphors; they were physical realities. And they were compounded by the absence of any mental health support. In Basirhat Block 2, there is no counsellor, no psychiatrist, not even a nurse trained to recognise domestic violence. Women’s complaints were either dismissed as “tension” (a word used to minimise) or treated with over-the-counter painkillers for headaches that were really the somatic expression of fear. I also noticed how women’s health was used against them. Several husbands accused their wives of being “weak” or “mad” when they showed signs of distress. A woman’s anxiety became proof of her inadequacy, further justifying the abuse. This is where discourse theory (Foucault, 1978) became indispensable: the violence was not only causing the symptoms but also shaping how those symptoms were interpreted—as personal failings rather than injuries. Power, as Foucault (1978) argued, is productive; it creates the very subjects it governs. In this case, the verbal abuse was not noise but a slow, methodical shaping of self that would not resist.

### **Intersectionality in the Data**

The tables in the results section showed clear disparities. Women from Scheduled Caste backgrounds reported higher rates of abuse across all forms. Muslim women in the sample reported slightly higher health impacts, though the difference was not large

enough to be statistically significant given the small numbers. Low-income women faced the highest rates of depression and suicidal thoughts. These patterns confirm what intersectional theory predicts: vulnerability is not evenly distributed. But the interviews added a layer that numbers alone could not capture. For SC women, the abuse was often laced with caste slurs—"you bring bad luck because of your caste," "your people are like this." For Muslim women, particularly in mixed-caste or Hindu-majority villages, isolation was often reinforced by communal boundaries. And for women in the lowest income bracket, economic dependence was absolute. One woman told me, "If I leave, where will I go? I have no money, no education. My father is dead, my brother has his own family. I would be on the street." Her words reminded me that poverty is not just a background factor; it is a trap that multiplies the effects of psychological control.

### **Why Women Stay?**

Throughout the entire course of this research, I was repeatedly haunted by a question—one that outsiders frequently ask: Why don't these women simply leave such relationships? However, as I interviewed these women, I came to realize that this question does not apply here. The reason is that, for the majority of them, "leaving" is not a realistic possibility. To leave would mean losing their children, losing their home, and losing their place in society—and, often, facing even worse forms of abuse on top of all that. Some had indeed attempted to leave but were compelled to return due to pressure from their own families. The red-light area in Matia serves to further intensify this trap. Although they did not state it explicitly, several women hinted that returning to their paternal homes was an impossibility for them. This is because, were they to return, the looming threat of being trafficked would hang over their heads forever. One woman, who had been married off at the age of fourteen, whispered to me: "My mother says—'Here, at least you have a roof over your head. If you come back, who knows what will become of you?'" By "what will become of you," she meant the terrifying prospect of being dragged away into a brothel. That very fear held by her family—the fear of trafficking—which had initially pushed her into a premature marriage, is now the very force keeping her confined within a home of abuse. The very logic intended to save her

has, in the end, transformed into the logic that keeps her trapped. One woman, Rupa, had gone to her brother's house after a particularly brutal episode of verbal abuse. Her brother brought her back the same day. "He said, 'We do not keep our sisters after marriage. It brings shame.'" That single sentence contains entire structures: patrilocality, honour, the prioritisation of marital stability over individual wellbeing (Dube, 1997)—and, in this context, the unspoken terror of a daughter "unprotected" and vulnerable to trafficking.

The women who stayed were not passive. They developed strategies: silence to avoid provoking anger, appeasement, secret savings, and turning to informal support networks. But these were survival strategies, not solutions. The notion of "agency" needs to be complicated here; it is not about empowerment but about navigating a system where every exit is blocked—by poverty, by social stigma, and by the ever-present shadow of Matia. Walker's (1979) cycle of violence also helps explain why women stay—the honeymoon phase plants a stubborn seed of hope that "he is not always bad," and that hope, while a survival mechanism, becomes the very thing the cycle exploits to keep them bound.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

If I take anything from this study, it is that addressing psychological violence requires more than laws. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, exists, but not a single woman I interviewed had heard of it. And even if they had, accessing legal help is daunting: police stations are far, male officers are often dismissive, and the process requires money and time that most women do not have.

What might help, instead, are interventions that work with the grain of community life. Mental health services need to be embedded in primary health centres, with female counsellors who understand the local context. Self-help groups—which already exist in many villages—could become spaces not just for microfinance but for raising awareness about psychological abuse and providing peer support.

### **Conclusion**

I embarked on this research driven by academic curiosity. I possessed a personal

understanding of the existence of psychological abuse and its health-related consequences; however, I had no conception of just how terrifyingly vast and profound its scope truly was. This research has firmly convinced me that psychological abuse is not merely a "mild" form of domestic violence. Rather, it serves as the very framework upon which all other forms of violence are built. It normalizes control, stifles resistance, and convinces women that all their suffering is entirely their own fault. Moreover, its impact is not confined solely to the depths of the psyche; it seeps into the very flesh and bone—manifesting as insomnia, chronic anxiety, headaches for which medical science can find no organic cause, and depression. The situation in Basirhat Block 2 is even more brutal. Economic dependency and rigid gender roles have combined to create fertile ground for psychological manipulation. Women's mobility is restricted, their avenues for earning an income are blocked, and the very web of kinship ties often serves to reinforce the abuse (Dube, 1997). The "Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005" (Government of India, 2005) appears to exist solely within the pages of statute books; not a single woman I interviewed was even aware of the Act's existence. Even if they were aware, the police station remains a distant journey, the financial costs are prohibitive, and the entire system seems perpetually stacked against them. The primary obstacle is neither legal nor financial, but cultural. Beliefs such as "a woman must make adjustments to keep the household running," "marriage is an unbreakable bond," and "a husband has the right to control his wife" are deeply entrenched. Passed down from generation to generation—echoed by mothers-in-law and reinforced by neighbors—these notions are eventually internalized by the women themselves (Foucault, 1978). What is needed is not merely awareness, but a revolution in mindset—a fundamental transformation in society's core perceptions regarding gender, power, and healthy relationships.

### **Prevention and Redressal**

To genuinely reduce psychological violence against women, our primary task is to raise awareness. By this, I mean true awareness—awareness that must be disseminated through schools, colleges, and the mass media—so that people can accurately recognize



the signs of such violence. These signs include "gaslighting" (creating psychological confusion), controlling behavior, isolating an individual from their friends and family, or issuing constant threats. Furthermore, this process must begin at the very grassroots level; children need to learn fundamental moral values right at home—such as showing respect and empathy toward others. Secondly, psychological abuse must be recognized as a criminal offense—plainly and unequivocally. We must ensure that victims of abuse can obtain court-issued Protection Orders as swiftly as possible, without facing any unnecessary complications or bureaucratic delays. Moreover, we need to establish free counseling services and helplines that are truly effective in practice. Concurrently, police officers, medical professionals, and educators require proper training to accurately identify the signs of abuse—as, currently, many of them fail to detect these indicators or do not treat the matter with sufficient seriousness.

Another critically important aspect is assisting women in becoming financially self-reliant. When a woman becomes financially dependent on her abuser, she often feels trapped or cornered; driven solely by the urge to survive, she silently endures the psychological abuse. This vicious cycle of abuse must be broken. Evidence from the WHO multi-country study (WHO, 2005) suggests that economic empowerment combined with awareness-raising yields the most sustainable reductions in intimate partner violence.

### **Concluding Remarks**

I often find myself thinking about a woman I interviewed toward the end of my fieldwork. Her name was not Malati or Rupa or Fatima—I have used pseudonyms, but I remember her face. She was in her late forties, her children grown, her body worn down by years of hard work and harder words. She told me she had not slept through the night in fifteen years. She told me she had headaches that sometimes made her vision blur. She told me she had stopped hoping for anything to change. At the end of the interview, she looked at me and said, very quietly: "You are going to write about us. Please write the truth. Not just that we suffer, but that we are not weak. We survive. But surviving should not be all there is. I have carried that sentence with me through every draft of this paper. She was right: surviving should not be all there is. Psychological violence may be

invisible, but its consequences are not. They are written on women's bodies, in their sleepless nights, in the hollow spaces behind their eyes. The question is whether we—researchers, policymakers, communities, neighbours—are willing to see it, to name it, and to act. This study is a small attempt to do that. It is not definitive; it is based on one block, 100 women, a limited time. But I hope it contributes to a growing recognition that psychological violence matters, that it hurts, that it kills slowly, and that addressing it is not optional. It is a matter of justice, and of health, and of dignity.

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## *Commentary*

### Governance, Regulation, and The Aravalli Landscape: A Policy Dilemma <sup>1</sup>

Sayari Adhikary <sup>2</sup>

The Aravalli range, considered as one of the world's oldest fold mountain systems, plays an important role in maintaining environmental balance in northern India. It prevents eastward desertification, acts as a groundwater recharge zone, regulates dust storms and moderates temperature extremes. It also acts as a biodiversity hub and serves as a home to tribal and pastoral communities. The recent SC acceptance of the definition of the Aravalli, provided by the Ministry of Environment Forest and Climate Change, has sparked a fresh debate between administrative clarity and ecological complexity. (Supreme Court of India, 2025; Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change [MoEFCC], 2025). Using qualitative analysis of policy documents environmental reports and judicial interventions the paper intends to assess how effective the regulatory framework is. The findings indicate that weak environmental regulations and competing interests have resulted in considerable use of resources. It also concludes that sustainable development strategies, stronger environmental governance and greater public awareness can help preserve the Aravalli range while allowing for development.

**Keywords:** aravalli debate, development v/s environment, environmental sustainability,

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## environmental governance in India

The Aravalli range, also called the “green lungs”, has stood the test of time and contributed as an ecological hub maintaining environmental balance in northern India. The range stretches across 37 districts of the states of Gujarat, Rajasthan, Haryana, and Delhi (NCR), acting as a natural barrier against eastward desertification, regulating the regional climate. It also acts as an aquifer contributing to local rivers like Chambal, Luni and Sabarmati. It also acts as a green buffer for the increasing urbanizing regions. According to a report by the MoEFCC, despite such ecological importance, the Aravalli range has experienced significant environmental stress over the past few years. ([MoEFCC], 2025).

Expansion of activities like mining, urbanization, infrastructure development related activities led to extensive deforestation and biodiversity loss in the region. Illegal mining, poor enforcement of environmental governance, expansion of urban centres, has further intensified the issue. This has raised the debate between development priorities and the need for the environmental protection. In this context, this paper seeks to examine the ongoing debate of development v/s environment in the region. The paper aims to scrutinize the existing policy frameworks, governance mechanisms and judicial interventions in addressing the environmental challenges related to the region. Additionally, it also examines the consequences of environmental degradation in the region. By highlighting the gaps in implementation and the competing interests shaping environmental outcomes, this study argues for a more balanced and sustainable approach to development. Protecting the Aravallis is crucial for both conservation and ensuring long term ecological security in the region.

## Literature Review

The Aravalli debate entails the ongoing conflict between environmental enthusiasts on the one hand and the supreme court backed government of India’s attempt of defining the Aravalli mountain ranges on the other hand, so as to have a clear-cut distinction on which places to use for developmental activities and which places to leave. Supreme courts acceptance of this uniform central definition for the purpose of administrative efficiency has invited criticisms and large-scale protests. In a show named Debate with

Arnab, in republic tv it was discussed at length. According to the show the govt seems to have contradicted itself by limiting the area by a definition which is only protecting 8.7% of the area. According to this show the new definition would leave out 90% of the ranges unprotected and therefore subjected to extensive illegal mining, and other developmental activities that would cost us our ecological stability (Republic World, 2025). This paper aims to do a qualitative study and analyse policy reviews, judicial interpretations, newspaper articles and existing sources to find out whether this definition would be beneficial and if not, how should the government tackle it in order to allow sustainable development while preserving the ranges.

The Aravalli's preserve the ecology in various ways the first being a barrier to eastward desertification, and protecting the states on the windward side of the mountains from becoming arid. Secondly it acts as a climate regulator and helps in maintaining the AQI of several states. Thirdly the low-lying ridges act as aquifers draining local rivers. The forest cover acts as a living ecosystem and is home to several animals and tribal and pastoral communities. Existing literature states that degradation of the Aravalli poses a serious threat to biodiversity, groundwater availability and air quality affecting both ecological balance and human beings. Scholars have identified mining and urbanization as the leading cause of degradation in the area, both legal and illegal mining has led to strip the landscape of its natural sources. Additionally, rapid urbanization in the NCR area has intensified pressures in the region (Kishwar & Nahar, 2026). Mining has significantly changed the geomorphology of the region subjecting the region to long term environmental implications. Urbanization has led to extensive land use and loss of forest cover thereby disrupting the ecological balance of the region. Despite regulatory frameworks lack of efficient ground level implementations and the continued existence of illegal mining highlights critical gaps in enforcement and proper monitoring mechanisms. According to the Republic tv this new definition has opened up 90% of the hills to illegal mining. Several studies have analysed the role of environmental governance and policy frameworks in shaping the outcomes of the Aravalli region (Republic World, 2025). While environmental laws and policy frameworks have tried to regulate mining activities and protect the forest areas, their effectiveness is undermined

by poor enforcement, institutional weakness and competing economic interests. Existing literature suggests that lack of proper environmental governance in India has led to such extensive environmental degradation. Historical experiences from other parts of India, portray the environmental consequences of the development projects undertaken without adequate ecological safeguards. One such example is Jharia Coalfields in Jharkhand where decades of coal mining have led to underground coal fires, land subsidence, air pollution and the displacement of local communities (Central Mine Planning and Design Institute, 2020; Indian School of Mines, 2018). Even though the coal extraction has led to significant economic and industrial growth, the environmental impacts keep on affecting the region, displaying the long-term consequences of unstable resource exploitation.

A similar example is that of the Tehri Dam Project of Uttarakhand. It was contracted to generate hydroelectricity and provide irrigation facilities, instead, it resulted in the submergence of the forested areas, and agricultural land, displacement of the local inhabitants and concerns regarding ecological instability in the fragile Himalayan ecosystem. This project too had sparked considerable debate among environmentalists, and policy makers alike regarding the balance between development objectives and environment protection. The above cases demonstrate that development initiatives can have serious environmental consequences, if environmental concerns are not adequately integrated into the planning and implementation process. These cases studies serve as important models for understanding the ongoing Aravalli debate.

Despite focusing on individual aspects like mining, urbanization, lack of environmental governance, there is a lack of integrated analysis which connects these dimensions under a broader framework of sustainable development. This study seeks to bridge that gap by analysing the interrelationship between environmental degradation, governance challenges and development in the Aravalli region.

### **Methodology**

This section employs a comprehensive approach to investigating anthropogenic determinants and ecological resilience in the ranges. The methodology involves a

combination of Policy review, analysis of available sources and data and empirical observation to provide a holistic understanding of the interplay between human activities and ecological systems in the Aravalli ranges. This study examines government reports, academic articles, public domain legal and policy documents such as supreme court orders, PIB notes etc. By critically evaluating existing literature and policy frameworks. This paper seeks to provide a thorough understanding of the ongoing debate between developments and environmental sustainability in the region.

### Analysis and discussions

Researchers have repeatedly pointed out the crucial role, the Aravalli's play, in maintaining environmental stability in the northern India. Also known as the green lungs of North India in maintaining the AQI, given the already deteriorating air quality in Delhi NCR (which sometimes goes above 700 where 500 is considered critical by the government), it's essential that measures are taken to preserve this ecological hub. It also prevents eastward expansion of the Thar Desert, and contribute significantly to groundwater recharge and biodiversity conservation. However, increasing anthropogenic factors have disrupted this fragile ecosystem. The key factor for environmental degradation in the region is mining both legal and illegal. It has led to large scale deforestation, soil erosion, and habitat loss and has not only altered the geographical landscape but also has reduced the ecological resilience of the region. The government through a report titled *"Detailed Action plan, Aravalli landscape Restoration (Aravalli Green Wall)"* and published by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) had highlighted the environmental vulnerability as well as importance of the area, prior to this judgement (MoEFCC, 2025). Another important factor contributing to environmental degradation is Urbanization. Rapid Industrialization, expansion of cities, especially around Gurugram, has led to significant land use changes. Forest areas have increasingly been encroached upon for real estate and infrastructure development resulting in habitat fragmentation and weakening the environmental balance. Such unplanned growth reflects how economic growth is often prioritized over ecological sustainability. The environmental degradation of the range is not only an ecological concern, but also a matter that directly affects human well-being. As we



know, the range supports local communities through groundwater recharge, regulation of air quality, and maintaining ecological conditions necessary for sustainable livelihoods. Environmental degradation has led to the depletion of forest cover, the consequences of which are faced first by those who depend on natural resources the most. Reduced water availability, poor air quality, and loss of ecological stability can greatly impact the lives of the surrounding population. In this sense, the debate extends beyond, just environmental concerns and enters the realm of human rights, specifically the right to live in a healthy and sustainable environment. Therefore, protecting the ecologically sensitive landscape is not merely an obligation to protect the environment, but also a responsibility towards present and future generations depending on these natural systems. The role of governance and policy implementation plays a central role in order to understand the Aravalli debate. Despite various environmental laws and regulatory frameworks already in existence. Their effectiveness remains limited due to weak enforcement, administrative loopholes and conflicting interests between development and conservation. Judicial interventions like supreme court orders attempted to curb illegal mining in order to protect the region. However, these measures have had little to no success due to implementational challenges and effective monitoring. The most important question pertaining this entire debate is, can an entire mountain range stretching over 670kms covering 37 districts across four states, having huge environmental importance be limited to a definition for administrative efficiency? The Aravalli's plays a critical role in the area, hence, limiting it to a short definition might lead to making a large portion of the range vulnerable that does not meet the 100 m elevation criteria. The low-lying ridges of the Aravalli acts as aquifers often meeting water shortages of the nearby areas. Such a definition would lead to drought like conditions in the near future. According to an article from Down to Earth, this new definition will exclude 90% of the ranges from protection (Ahluwalia & Shahabuddin, 2025). Against such allegations, the PIB has made an attempt to clarify the committees and governments stance, by stating the definition to be scientific, transparent and beneficial for ecological conservation. (Press Information Bureau, 2025).

## **Findings**

The study reveals that the region is facing severe ecological stress due to a combined impact of developmental activities (both legal and illegal) and ineffective policy implementation. Despite regulatory frameworks and judicial interpretations, their impact has been limited due to ineffective implementation, lack of strict monitoring and competing economic interests. The findings also show that environmental concerns have very often been subordinated to developmental priorities leading to unsustainable development and exploitation of natural resources. Adding to that is gap in governance and lack of coordinated stakeholders which has further accelerated the situation. This study highlights the urgent need for a more consolidated and sustainable approach to look after the Aravalli ranges.

## **Conclusion**

Despite holding immense ecological significance, the Aravalli's continues to face severe threats from anthropological activities and governance failure. This paper has pointed out the complex interrelationship between development and ecological conservation, focusing on how unchecked mining, increased urbanization, and weak governance has led to the degradation of this crucial ecosystem. While efforts through legal and policy interventions have been made, their limited effectiveness highlights the deeper structure challenges in the environmental governance. The findings stress that protecting the ranges is not only essential for biodiversity preservation and maintenance of ecological balance but also for long term climate resilience and sustainable development. A shift towards a more responsible development is necessary to address the ongoing crisis Without immediate and sustained action the degradation in the region could have far reaching implications.

## **Recommendations**

To address the present challenges pertaining to that region, enforcement of existing environmental laws and regulations is crucial. Authorities must ensure strict monitoring of mining activities and take strict actions against illegal operations. Sustainable

Planning of land use should be focused on, to control urban expansion and encroachment into ecologically sensitive areas. Along with it, immediate identification of illegal mining should be implemented. Upon identification, such mining operations should be shut down along with stricter monitoring and licensing. Eco friendly techniques along with environmental safeguards should be made mandatory where mining is permitted.

Critical areas (Ecologically sensitive zones) of the Aravalli range should be mapped and designated as protected zones in order to stop commercial exploitation. Large scale reforestation and land restoration should be undertaken. Better coordination between central and state governments along with local authorities is necessary for effective environmental governance. Local communities should be actively involved in conservation through awareness programs and participatory governance. Satellite imaging, GIS mapping, digital surveillance should be implemented to track land use and illegal activities. Public awareness should be conducted to educate the people about the importance of such environmentally critical areas in this case the Aravalli's.

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## *Commentary*

### Oppression and Ecology: Reading the Representation of Subaltern Voice in Rabindranath Tagore's Poem "*Dui Bigha Jomi*" <sup>1</sup>

Srijani Dutta <sup>2</sup>

Rabindranath Tagore is one of the most acclaimed Indian poets who has given voices to the suppressed, indigenous or subaltern souls in his literary creations. His works represent the urban spaces, rural landscapes along with the native inhabitants of the different localities. Besides being an international creative genius, he also tries to establish himself as a critic of the socio-cultural- political issues of his contemporary era. This essay engages itself into a survey of Tagore's position as an intellectual who dares to question and makes his readers think critically. His poem "*Dui Bigha Jomi*" discusses the narrative of a farmer whose land has been purposefully occupied by a greedy, powerful zamindar. In this case, zamindar is the metaphor of the colonial forces whose territorial domination has caused ecological changes depicting the relation between colonialism and ecology. This poem is a mediation on colonialism and its effect on subaltern identities. This essay attempts to examine the voice of Upen, a subaltern figure who tries to establish a resistance against zamindar's dictatorship. Upen becomes the metaphor of all the subaltern figures who have to be awakened against the domination of any kind of exploitation.

**Keywords:** subaltern voice, farmer, ecology, oppression, colonialism, resistance

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*"Dui Bigha Jomi"* by Rabindranath Tagore is a narrative poem dealing with the loss of the land, ill effects of capitalism, ecological degradation, lament and remembrance of a hapless farmer. Here, the farmer is the symbol of the oppressed colonized souls whereas the zamindar is the colonial soul. He snatches the land from the poor farmer forcefully making him a homeless monk. The tone of the poem is melancholic and ends with irony. The zamindar wants to capture his land for widening his own artificial garden. Here, the artificial garden is the metaphor for modernity and progress. The land evokes out the sense of primitivism, pre-modernity. In this regard, the incident of Singur Andolan can be remembered. This essay does not criticize the then government's activity and rules. Instead, it brings forth an instance of dispute centering on land which causes conflict among the farmers and government. The ill effects of Singur Andolan centring on transfer of lands to establish factories and industry led to chaos and divide among the farmers. This incident also depicts how the farmers since time immemorial are facing problems as they rely on the agriculture-based economy while the governments attempt to shift the country's or state's economy from agriculture to industry. It is also an example of industrialisation which causes ecological damage. It can be argued that Tagore's poem foregrounds the reality of this incident in this poem.

The poem satirises the activity of the zamindar like people who butcher lands, ecology in order to build up tall buildings, multi-storeyed houses. This poem is written from the perspective of the farmer in order to highlight the atrocities done by colonialism, capitalism, slavery, migration and the interconnected relation between ecology and (Post) colonialism. If the colonial activity is seen as the 'modern' initiative, this kind of 'modernity' is terribly criticised in this text. The main concern of the poem lies in the space, ecology and the relation between space and ecology. Sadly, the shift from farmer's ancestral land to the zamindar's modern land entails a sense of change in the environment causing the lament and remembrance of the farmer upon his arrival after many years. It also metaphorically depicts how colonialism has caused ecological degradation and transformation in the land/space(s). According to Foucault, heterotopia means spaces with spaces. This essay tries to examine this overlapping relation between ecology/ environment and colonialism and the meaning of Postcolonial

melancholia through the metaphor of the heterotopia of a small land. Thus, this essay meticulously points out the bad sides of capitalism and industrialization in his poem. Tagore, however, has been a staunch vocal person of protest against any kind of exploitation and his other writings also justify his indifference to any kind of modernity that hampers the core value and ecology. This essay attempts to read the metaphorical theme of the poem. Upen, a farmer is the narrator of the poem telling the slices of his life experiences. The poem opens with the importance of the land as his only shelter which the zamindar wants to buy. Farmers are the sons of the soils. Metaphorically, the land is the home and the shelter. Upen has nothing except this small ancestral land. It is precious to him as this land brings forth the memory and the smell of his ancestors. Consequently, he becomes homeless and starts wandering on the streets. Upen's utterances make him a figure of resistance. He becomes the mouthpiece of all those farmers who have lost lands. He even calls out the zamindar as thief for snatching away lands from people. He consoles his mind saying that in lieu of this land, God has given him the entire world. The entire world has become his home. Here, the world is the nature, the ecology, the life. He travels many places. He encounters the varied colours and shapes of nature but cannot forget his ancestral land. The memory of the small, ancestral land acts as a mother and from its umbilical cord, he has been uprooted. Therefore, this mini land becomes the microcosm of the entire earth, ecology. He is a living entity/ a life who needs the ecology, the habitat to survive. He is just like an animal who has lost the forest, the home. The incessant growth of the modernization along with the huge amount of deforestation makes the ecology fragile. The picture of the perfect, modern, urban life imposed by colonialism is latently represented through the master-slave dichotomy between Upen and Zamindar. Upen is the picture of the uncivilized people whereas the zamindar represents the high-class modernity, the flag bearer of civilization. If Upen is the metonym for village, the zamindar is the metonym for the urbanity. In place of primitive, ecological land, the modern, artificial garden/land has been created. It destroys the natural ecology. Upen's remembrance of his land unearths the beauty of the nature, ecology. He emphasizes on the importance of the rural countryside as well as the nature. His return to that land acts as a 'postcolonial'

stance perpetuated by him. After reaching there, he sits under a tree. Miraculously, nature accepts and embraces her son by gifting him the fruits. Ironically, he has been criticised as thief by the council of zamindar. This is the tragic portrayal of the powerlessness of Upen like people and the position of the landlords, the colonial souls. The colonial masters attempt to conquer the lands. In the meantime, the land goes through the changes. The ecological temperament of this land goes through transformation but remains same in its essence. And this thing makes Upen nostalgic and close to nature.

According to Foucault, heterotopia signifies a place that is different from the mainstream space/place (Foucault, 1984). He mentions places like prison cells, graveyard, library and others. Heterotopia is a space within spaces. It is other spaces. In the poem "Dui Bigha Jomi," these two-acres land becomes the heterotopic space that makes Upen come back to its root. It is a long narrative of nature and the relation between nature and an individual. Written in the British Raj India, this poem becomes the mouthpiece of the indigenous voices and narratives. This land is the metaphor of India that is forcefully conquered and ruled by British Raj. But the poem celebrates the voice of the marginalized. It is the voice of the soil, soil of India. Therefore, Upen like farmers become the indigenous or postcolonial people narrating their sides of stories. The poem centres on the representation of ecology and land and how the powerful people like colonizers do the politics with the land. This land is snatched from Upen. It symbolically shows how the colonizers establish their colonies by uprooting and transcending the native, indigenous people into paupers. Later, Upen comes back for the sake of his memory and the land embraces its son metaphorically by giving him fruits. This poem does not promote colonialism rather sings the victory song of the possibilities of freedom, postcolonial melancholia and resistance. There is a sense of probability and possibility of returning of ownership and power in the poem. The poem depicts the master-slave dichotomy, the politics of power between powerful and powerless. Although the powerless (Upen) fails to reclaim his land, the poem ends with a sense of silent positivity and possibility. The Indian soil is the home of Indians. Similarly, the land rightfully belongs to Upen. Thus, Upen's arrival acts as a resistance to the paws of colonization



and exploitation. Although Upen is considered as thief, he is the ultimate master of this indigenous land. Thus, this poem reflects the native voice along with the representation of the urban ecology and transformation of the land. Therefore, one can find the yearning for the past land and this yearning makes the land a heterotopic space.

Dasgupta (2011) stated that Rabindranath Tagore can be understood as an Upanishadic poet who harmonized humanity with nature and recognized both the diversity and deep interconnectedness among human beings and other life forms. She focuses on the unity of man and ecology reflected in Tagore's works. "*Dui Bigha Jomi*" does not only celebrate the indigenous, Postcolonial voice of the wronged farmer, but also shows how colonialism negatively affects environment. Environmental humanities is a discipline of study that focuses on the environmental crisis from the socio-cultural- political perspective. The discussion on this theme can be extended to environmental humanities as this particular poem shows how the zamindar's action makes changes into the land. It goes through the metaphorical implementation of colonization. The poem maintains a temperament of resistance for the hapless farmer being the spokesperson. He returns and sings the song of melancholia and nostalgia. The process of colonialism has done a great change onto the land but Upen identifies his poor land. His subaltern voice remains 'unheard' and the problem related to the land remains 'unresolved' within the context of colonialism. This poem can be read as a wake-up call against oppression and colonialism. To me, Tagore appears to be a critical commentator. This essay concludes with the thought that the subalterns cannot speak properly.

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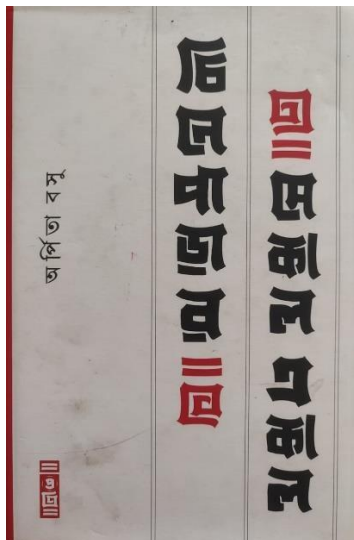
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## Book Review: Mapping the Chinese Legacy in Kolkata <sup>1</sup>

Ananda Mohan Kar <sup>2</sup>

Mapping the Chinese Legacy in Kolkata, Bose, A. (2019). *Chine padar ekal sekal* [The past and present of Chinatowns]. Prativash. 160 pp. ISBN 978-93-88735-44-5, Price Rs. 200



In the Bengali book *Chine Padar Ekal Sekal* (চীনে পাদার একাল সেকাল, The Past and Present of Chinatowns), Arpita Bose offers a ground-breaking exploration into the past and present of Kolkata's (formerly Calcutta) Chinese diaspora. She weaves together archival sources, oral histories, census records, and field visits to present a comprehensive portrait of a community that has remained on the margins. Kolkata is the only city in

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South Asia with two Chinatowns. However, the Chinese residents living in the city, despite a presence of over two centuries, have largely remained an enigma to most local people. The community is invisible in most of the mainstream academic works as well. This book stands apart for its attempt to present a holistic picture of the diaspora.

The author begins by locating her study in relation to existing literature on the Chinatowns of Calcutta. It has been mentioned that earlier research works on Kolkata's Chinese community, except the research done by Zhang Xing, did not use much archival materials. Bose on the other hand has consulted 47 Intelligence Bureau files, 27 Home Department (Political) Confidential files, and 3 Special Branch files. That apart, she has used oral history, census data, the District Gazetteer etc. Some readers might look for more precise dates. However, there are enough chronological references to understand historical transitions clearly.

The second chapter discusses the emergence of Chinese settlements in Bengal in details. The first Chinese colony in Bengal was established in 1781 by Yang-Ta-Chao. He was a sailor, and the colony was situated at a distance of fifteen miles from Kolkata, on the bank of the river Ganga, near Budge Budge. In that place, he had set up a sugar factory. He died in 1783 and thereafter the colony disappeared. Later, the place was named after him Achipur (p. 22). The temple he had established, and his tomb, are still there.

Thereafter, the Chinese shifted to Calcutta. Gradually, two Chinese neighbourhoods developed. The first Chinatown appeared in central Calcutta. The second one came up in Tangra. Archival materials show that these settlements were unhygienic and overcrowded from the beginning. However, in spite of harsh living conditions, the Chinese were able to create a vibrant Chinese cultural landscape with temples, Chinese schools, eateries, and decorated streets. At one time there were five Chinese schools in Calcutta (p. 134). Bose provides detailed demographic statistics—362 Chinese residents in 1837, rising to 1,640 in 1901 and peaking at 11,000 by 1962 (p. 31). The 1962 Sino-Indian war dramatically altered this trajectory. The community faced widespread suspicion,

surveillance, and persecution— including job dismissals from sensitive sectors like the port, internment at Deoli camp in Rajasthan, and difficulties in acquiring Indian citizenship thereafter. During the war, the Government of India suspected them to be engaged in spying for the enemy country China. As a result, they were viewed as a threat to national security. Even decades later, the fear of harassment remained. Over the years, many migrated abroad, particularly to developed countries like Canada. However, they still retained emotional ties to Kolkata. Many of them return to the city at the time of the Chinese New Year. The book cites a *Times of India* article, published in 2007, which reports that only 5,000 Chinese were living in Kolkata (p. 31).

The third chapter of the book explores social customs, religious beliefs, and changing family structures. The research notes that the traditional Chinese joint family system gradually gave way to nuclear families (p. 42). Earlier, adoption practices existed among childless couples, often involving payments to the biological parents to compensate their expenses for the care of the child in the initial years (p. 43). The community adhered to patriarchal traditions, believing that dying without a male heir condemned one to become an evil spirit. Belief in astrology was also quite common. With the passing of time, most of the families had converted to Christianity and they have Christian names. However, the elders of the family also give each child a Chinese name to preserve their culture (p. 44).

After the World War II, social environment witnessed change in the Chinese enclaves. Economic hardship forced some former Chinese soldiers into crime like engaging in extortion, robbery, and smuggling (pp. 61–62). Chinatown restaurants doubled as opium dens and brothels after dark. Apart from the Chinese, women from Burma and Nepal too were trafficked into prostitution rings (pp. 64, 67). The decline in criminal activity, following the Sino-Indian war, is documented through oral narratives and police reports (p. 69). Bose has referred to fictional portrayals of Chinatown – as a den of crime – in Bengali detective stories by Nihar Ranjan Roy, and in Hindi cinema like *Howrah Bridge* (p. 139). At the same time, she also highlights more empathetic depictions, notably in

*Jhao Jhien Hatya Rahashya* by Suchitra Bhattacharya (p. 139). Thus, the book takes a very objective, balanced, and unbiased position.

The most important part of the book is that it highlights an overlooked dimension of the community's history: political activism. There were massive internal divisions between the supporters of the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party. The Kuomintang opened its first office in Calcutta in 1911 (p. 76), eventually expanding to Bombay and to the tea gardens of North Bengal. Political activists from China frequently visited India. They organized dramas, collected donations, and published propaganda journals (p. 79). The discussion shows how politics can deeply affect the fabric of the diaspora community. Tensions between political factions led to violent confrontations—tanneries owned by Kuomintang supporters were torched (pp. 95–96), a Communist activist was murdered, and even marriages broke down over political differences (p. 96).

The research reveals connections between Chinese activists and prominent Indian leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru, Maulana Azad, Soumendra Nath Thakur (p. 99), and also some Communist figures (p. 81). The Chinatown had links with revolutionary groups like the Anushilan Samiti and the Gadar Party. The secluded space was used for supplying smuggled weapons and offering refuge to underground activists (pp. 98–99). While the Chinese immigrants admired Mahatma Gandhi, they were not with Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, Bengal's political icon, for his alignment with Japan, China's wartime enemy (p. 99).

The book also examines occupational patterns and class relations. The Chinese community was known for excellence in tanning, shoemaking, hairdressing, carpentry, and dentistry. Chinese street hawkers sold silk and acrobats performed in circuses during winter (p. 106). Their restaurants in Kolkata invented the now-iconic Indian Chinese cuisine. That apart, many skilled Chinese men worked in aircraft factories and railway workshops (p. 107). Bose also sheds light on illegal activities like money laundering (p. 108). Labor disputes between Chinese shoe manufacturers and Dalit workers reveal inter-community tensions. In 1941, 2,000 cobblers under the Harijan

Udhdhar Samiti, led by MLA Radhanath Das, went on strike for wage increase. At one point of time, the Chinese Consul General tried to mediate to resolve the conflict (p. 120). These labor movements demonstrate the community's negotiation with local politics and class struggles.

Some other diaspora people, the Jews, Parsis, and Armenians, came to Calcutta for trade and settled down. Gradually, they joined the colonial administrative elite. But on the contrary, the Chinese diaspora remained confined to a narrow range of trades in the city. The work also focuses on inter-community relations. The Chinese interacted with Bihari Muslims, Punjabi traders, Bengali clients, and Anglo-Indians in workspaces. However, social integration remained minimal. The Chinese gradually became interested in English. They began to send their children to the renowned English medium schools of the city, instead of the Chinese schools. In the educational institutions, the children came into contact with the boys and girls of other communities. However, the friendship remained limited in a sense that it often did not reach the level of frequent visit to the homes of each other (p.134). On the other hand, the relations with Indian workers were often strained, and sometimes confrontational. Bose cites detective department reports and even one report appeared in the *Dhumketu* magazine edited by famous Bengali poet Kazi Nazrul Islam (p. 132), revealing frequent tensions and physical confrontations in mixed workplaces.

The last chapter focuses on this diaspora community's efforts to assimilate. An Intelligence Bureau file noting reveals the participation of the Chinese in Rabindra Jayanti celebration (p.140). Similarly, the building of a Kali temple in Tangra indicates openness to local Hindu cultural traditions (p.140).

Undoubtedly, this book is a courageous attempt to capture the experience of Kolkata's Chinese community and it covers an extraordinary range of themes. Bose's work reminds us that diaspora histories are never linear. Their experiences are shaped by migrations, wars, adaptations, and dreams. With Kolkata's Chinese community at its heart, this work shows how to understand belonging, memory, and survival.

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