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Review Article

POLICY AND POLITICS OF THE DIGITAL: TECHNOLOGICAL AND REGULATORY TRAJECTORY IN INDIA

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Manisha Tripathy Pandey*
Niharika Parashar†

Abstract
This paper examines the technological and regulatory trajectory of digital transformation in India from the pre-independence era to the present, focusing on state policies, civic engagement, and market forces through Harold Lasswell's model of "who gets what, when, how" (1936). This study employs historical institutional analysis and highlights the challenges of digital rights, addressing the divide, security, and emergence of "digital elites". The analysis is divided into four phases: Foundational Communications Infrastructure (pre-independence to 1980s), Liberalisation and Digital Revolution (1980s to early 2000s), Data Governance and Digital Economy (mid-2000s to 2018), and Data Rights and Data Protection (2018 onwards). The analysis reveals a three-stage evolution from monopoly to liberalisation and the rise of private entities, leading to the dominance of tech giants or DigiLords. The study identifies interventions enabling this concentration and demonstrates how illiteracy creates DigiSerf dependency. The paper concludes digitalisation requires protection of rights, ethical security measures, balanced government-market influences, and citizen-centric advancement.

Keywords
Cybersecurity, Digital Infrastructure, E-governance, Data Protection, Public Policy

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Introduction

The 21st century has witnessed widespread technological advancement and digital transformation propelled by the invention, intervention, integration and implementation of digital technologies. The technology-driven 'Information Age'saw a proliferation of computers and information devices and was enabled by a network of satellites and broadband fibre optic cables, paving the way for 'the rise of the network society' (Castells, 2011). Central to this transformation and the rise of this new digital age are the processes of digitisation and digitalisation, the terms that are often used interchangeably but are distinct in their scope, role and application in the digital landscape. As per the Oxford English Dictionary, digitalisation is "the adoption or increase in use of digital or computer technology by an organisation, industry, country, etc." It describes “how knowledge is processed, and the processed knowledge provides social transformations beyond digitisation, interaction, the annihilation of time and space, the phenomenon of usage in multimedia.” Digitalisation in India cannot be understood in isolation. It must be seen in the context of the political and economic structures and processes that shape and continue to give meaning and essence to digitalisation. Digitisation, on the other hand, is a part of the digitalisation process that involves the conversion of analog information to digital data. The aim of digitisation and digitalisation as a united force is to create a digital ecosystem that promotes digital growth, sectoral integration, citizen engagement and empowerment.

As per the *State of India’s Digital Economy* 2024 report, India is the third largest digitalised country in the world. However, only 38% of Indian households are digitally literate. This raises critical questions about the extent and impact of digitalisation in India: How far are we digitalised, and *who gets what, when, how?* (Lasswell, 1936). Has the process of digitisation in India led to the emancipation of the masses, or has it led to the creation of newer forms of haves and have-nots? Does it benefit the majority, or does it serve the digital elite? To what extent have we transitioned to an “electronic cottage”? Is the digital infrastructure available across regions and demographics in India homogenous? What is the

context and the time frame in which digital transformation was given primacy by the Indian State? What are the value conditions sought, gained, and lost at the altar of digital progress?

To understand this, one must critically examine India's digital prowess and progress beyond the surface-level metrics to examine key elements like digital inclusivity and exclusion, accessibility and affordability, cyber security threats and privacy concerns and quality over quantity of digitised services. The social milieu and ethos on which the policies are premised must be addressed. This paper attempts to trace various policies pre- and post-independence, which have led to the bridging of connectivity and proximity and the building of digitalisation and digitisation in India. An attempt will be made to assess the country's digital ecosystem by means of reviewing secondary resources and suggesting amends (if required) on the existing policies to combat the digital divide by exploring avenues aimed at reducing digital hierarchy and enabling the digitally poor. To interpret policies aimed at achieving public objectives and politics of a state, it is pivotal to understand the state's history, culture and public problems (Lasswell, 1936). Politics influences discourse; policy governs it. Conversely, policy should be objective (Lasswell, 1936) and binding (Easton, 1955) in nature.

An ongoing yet incomplete process, digitalisation, requires state intervention and market innovation for policy implementation as both state and market have complementary roles in bringing about digital transformation regardless of their distinct functions. Technological advancement and digital transformation are propelled by the market while the state acts primarily as the regulatory force in the new age of liberalisation and interconnectedness. However, challenges like inadequate skill to use digital services causing skill gaps that further create hierarchies and foster digital lag; resistance to change from traditional manual systems to integrated digital systems; the lack of robust cyber security measures to deal with cyber intrusions and sophisticated cyber threats; cost barriers; and uneven infrastructural development serve as an impediment to bringing about overall digital transformation.

Mapping the Technological and Regulatory Trajectory of Digital Transformation in India

India has witnessed major paradigmatic shifts in technology, governance, the nature of crime and societal expectations over the years. Policies facilitating digitalization in India have transformed from state-controlled establishment of basic communication systems and laying the groundwork for future technological development to marking a shift towards privatisation, computerization, and internetization, followed by the integration of digital technologies into the economy and governance, and finally emphasising on content moderation and data regulation.

Digital policies in India marked a transition from the seemingly feudal Post Office Act of 1837 to the prevailing discourse surrounding deep state and personal data protection, which is reflected in its approach to communication, privacy, and digital governance. While some experts view this progression as a move from an agricultural revolution to an e-governance revolution, this perspective may be overly simplistic, where e-governance refers to the application of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) to the process of government functioning. Such a myopic view fails to recognise India's transition from traditional industrialism to digital capitalism. This trajectory reflects the impact and effectiveness of India's digital policies in shaping the nation's socio-economic landscape with the potential for further evolution into what may be called "digital feudalism" or “technofeudalism”.

India’s march towards the digital can be explained by examining the development of communication, information, and digital policies. The development of India’s digital policy can be traced through four phases:

Phase I: Foundational Communications Infrastructure (Pre-independence to 1980s)

Phase II: Liberalisation and Digital Revolution (1980s to early 2000s)

Phase III: Data Governance and Digital Economy (Mid-2000s to 2018)

Phase IV: Data Rights and Data Protection (2018 onwards)

Phase I: Foundational Communications Infrastructure (Pre-independence to 1980s)

Phase I marked the transition from rudimentary postal services to more sophisticated modes of communication like wireless telegraphy as the foundation to India's technological landscape was established during this period. A basic communication infrastructure was set up, and the legislations required to regulate and monitor the same was established.

What seems to be unfathomable now is that horse and foot-based postal services dominated the region before the imperialist rule. The Post Office Act of 1837 laid the legal framework for providing for a state-sponsored, systematic, centralised and 'public' postal system in British India. Based on the colonial British administration's desire to monitor and regulate the flow of information, this act set a precedent for state intervention in communication technologies. The Post Office Act, 1837 was replaced by the Post Office Act, 1854.

A trans-India telegraph system was subsequently adopted in 1854. The Act No. XXXIV of 1854 rendered the British government exclusive rights to establish and manage electric telegraphs in India. However, while the enactment is adaptable and applicable to emerging technologies, its centralised nature created significant limitations. Besides being a communication medium, the telegraph also became a source of information for the government.The establishment of the British-owned telephone and telephone lines in 1881 further supplemented the existing telegraph networks; however, concentrated prosperity and localised growth led to a "deep digital divide".

From birds fetching letters to individuals talking to each other on wired phones, the world witnessed quite a transformation. A similar line of upgradation in the communication sector was witnessed with the introduction of wireless telegraphy apparatus. The Indian Wireless Telegraphy Act of 1933 was enacted "to regulate the possession of wireless telegraphy apparatus" such as satellite phones. The umbrella term "wireless telegraphy apparatus" can be applied to monitor and control radiotelegraphy as well because of its ability to disseminate information wirelessly. The Indian State Broadcasting Service (later All India Radio in

1936) introduced organised radio broadcasting in India on April, 1930 on an experimental basis which went on to become All India Radio on 8 June 1936.

After Independence in 1947, India's communication infrastructure witnessed a paradigmatic shift with the transfer of power from the colonial regime in 1947. While the foundational communication infrastructure established by the Britishers served as the kernel, India after 1947 was vested with the responsibility of ensuring, maintaining and expanding the existing network to suit national interest. India's Scientific Policy Resolution (SPR) of 1958 was one such regulation that emphasised on the role of science and technology in the pursuit of national development. It aimed at fostering, promoting, and sustaining the cultivation of scientific inquiry, rational thinking and scientific research in all its aspects - pure, applied, and educational to actualise a scientifically oriented society.

The first phase of development set the motion for India's scientific and technological vigour but lacked inclusivity. Though the subsequent policies are premised around the ideals of democracy, transparency and indigeneity, the colonial hangover is still reflected in the legislations of today. For example, the Internet Freedom Foundation (a digital rights organisation) notes that parts of the Telecommunications Act of 2023 are nearly identical to the Indian Telegraph Act of 1885, particularly with reference to their focus on government control.

Phase II: Liberalisation and Digital Revolution (1980s to early 2000s)

The second phase, aided by economic liberalisation, witnessed widespread digital transformation between the 1980s and 2000 policy, characterized by widespread adoption of data services. The IT industry in India boomed fifty times more than in the 90s by 2000 (Gopalakrishnan, 2016). This phase was marked by a shift from the erstwhile state-controlled economy to an open and competitive environment.

Technology Policy Statement 1983 (TPS 1983) focused on the importance of "technological competence and self-reliance, with the objective to integrate programmes of socio-economic sectors

with the national R&D system and create a national innovation system". It aimed to foster indigenous technological capabilities to uplift all sections of society through tech-driven large-scale production. As the role of science and technology gained momentum for the nation's overall development, policies focused on expanding its key driver, the computer and its associated parts. Computer Policy of 1984 and Computer Software Export, Software Development and Training Policy, 1986 were premised on liberalising import duties and hardware imports to facilitate "software exports" in sophisticated machines.

The bodies monitoring and enabling the telecommunication sector in India, too, witnessed massive shuffles and remodelling during this period to cope with the technological advancement of the day. The Department of Telecommunications (DoT) was created in 1985 to ensure targeted growth. Mahanagar Telecommunication Nigam Limited (MTNL) for metro cities and Videsh Sanchar Nigam Limited (VSNL) for international services were established for effective and efficient telecommunication services. Further economic deregulation marked the privatisation of telecom services in the subsequent years. The National Telecom Policy 1994,a landmark policy, mandated universal, affordable and efficient connectivity for Indians while rooting for India as the "major manufacturing base and major exporter of telecom equipment".

As the telecom industry grew rapidly, there emerged a need to regulate, oversee and monitor the same because of which the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) was established in 1997. It aided the transition from a state-controlled monopoly of telecom services to an organised, regulated market system marked by competitiveness and quality standards. TRAI, a regulatory body could recommend new telecom service providers, set the terms for license and ensure compliance, regulate tariffs and aid in spectrum allocation. A consumer protection tribunal, Telecom Dispute Settlement Appellate Tribunal (TDSAT), was also established as part of its objectives. However, TRAI sustained as a recommendatory body alone as its directives were not binding on the central government (Section 11(1)). The Act, regardless of its objective to provide quality telecom services by catering to

consumer interest, fails to list out the various mechanisms that may be implemented to achieve the same. A “hardcode” definition for “net neutrality” was not provided, as noted by a report by the DoT (Chandrasekhar, 2015)

ICT revolution paved way for the electronification and digitisation of analog data (images, voice, text, data) by the computer which led to the convergence of technology as used in telephone, video, fax, data, radio, pager or broadcasting into one network, i.e. the Internet. This subsequently led to higher regulation and demonopolization of the networks and services as directed by the New Telecom Policy (NTP), 1999.Aimed at modernising and revolutionising India’s telecom infrastructure and amplifying tele density penetration by attracting investment and entry of multiple operators, the NTP 1999 enforced the Universal Service Obligation to bridge the digital divide and serve the remotest and geographically isolated communities (Section 6); however, critics argue “NTP 1999 does not prioritise USO objectives” leading to inadequacy in equitable distribution of access to telecom services.

Phase III: Data Governance and Digital Economy (Mid-2000s to 2018)

The third phase saw the onset of data-driven governance and digitised economic services between mid-2000s to 2018. Such a digital transformation was sustained by augmented network coverage which led to the creation of an e-identity system designed to provide electronic delivery of government services.

The IT Act, 2000 serves as the legal apparatus allowing “e-transactions, e-governance and cybersecurity” by rendering “electronic records” and “digital signatures”, constitutionally valid. (Section 4 and 5) It laid the foundation for government initiatives like Aadhaar and DigiLocker aimed at public service delivery and “record-keeping”. Unlike other legislation, “cybercrime” was defined and the penalties for violations were determined in the IT Act 2000. However, critics have expressed concerns and scepticism about potential government intervention, interception, and overreach, irrespective of its role in upholding data security and privacy.

Technology, the fuel for building a digital state, was widely adopted and endorsed before 2003, but “sustainability” was not given priority until STP 2003.

Science and Technology Policy, 2003 aimed to "advance scientific temper and fully integrate science and technology into all spheres of national activity on a sustainable basis". Drawing upon the protection of fundamental rights and principles of inclusivity and equality, emphasis was made on creating an Intellectual Property Rights (IPR regime). It sought to increase state funding for the development of science and technology.

India’s telecommunication system witnessed massive shifts as reflected in its policies to build a strong digital infrastructure. The Broadband Policy of 2004 aimed at improving the growth rate of subscribers and clearly defined the term “broadband” as “always on” “internet connection” with a download speed of a minimum “256 kbps”. It focused on affordability, accessibility and affordability of services so that last-mile connectivity can be achieved by bridging gaps and eradicating barriers. However, the broadband speed was insufficient, and no clear blueprint was devised to cater to service delivery challenges. It failed to meet its targets as noted in “Telecom Regulatory Authority of India Recommendations on Growth of Broadband” and “Information Note to the Press (Press Release No. 63 of 2010)”. It became important to "make all government services accessible to the common man in his locality, through common service delivery outlets” by ensuring “efficiency, transparency, and reliability of such services at affordable costs to realise the basic needs of the common man" as highlighted in the National e-Governance Plan (NeGP, 2006). However, while centralised SDCs were deployed in India, advanced technologies like cloud computing gained momentum with the introduction of AWS with Elastic Compute Cloud (EC2) service by Amazon in 2006.This Act was important to the Public-Private Partnership; however, unequal access to telecommunication services impacted e-service delivery and its utilisation. This led to the formulation of the Information Technology Act Amendment of 2008 (effective from 2009) which formed the underpinning for a secure, safe and private

implementation of digital initiatives while ensuring a secure cyberspace.

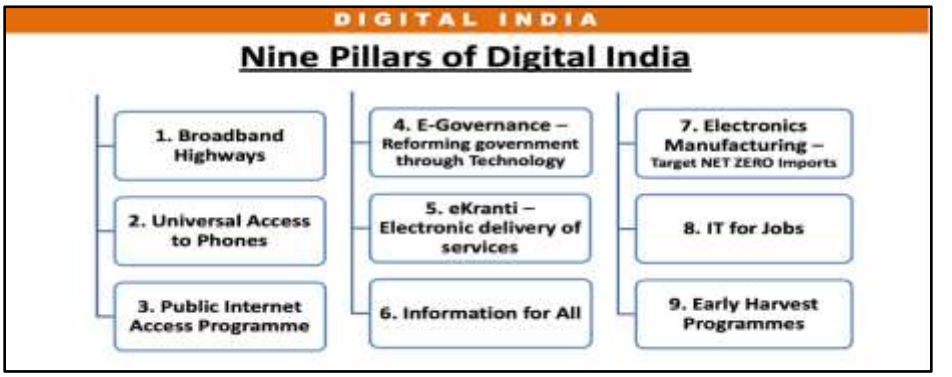
IT Act Amendment of 2008 defined cyber offences like cyberstalking, identity theft and phishing and imposed penalties while addressing the need to inculcate data security to protect data and prevent breaches. The term “digital signatures” was swapped for “electronic signatures”, yet the enactment failed to address emerging technologies like AI, blockchain, etc. It also introduced specifications for cyber cafes and intermediaries with the goal of user data retention by the state, but key aspects like "sensitive personal data" were not addressed. Rule 3 and Rule 4 of the Information Technology (Reasonable security practices and procedures and sensitive personal data or information) Rules, 2011 defined what constitutes "sensitive personal data" and directed “body corporate to provide policy for privacy and disclosure of information”. It mandated accessible and easily comprehensible privacy policies that sought consent from users before collecting personal data and its disclosure, with certain exceptions,like government agencies could obtain the data when legally required. Little to no emphasis was placedon mechanisms that ensured or enforced compliance measures, and neither were the IT Rules, 2011 at par with global laws around cybersecurity. It was thus imperative to “strengthen and enhance India's position as the Global IT hub and to use IT and cyberspace as an engine for rapid, inclusive and substantial growth” for the creation of a “knowledge-based global economy” as per the provisions of National Policy on Information Technology (NPIT) 2012.

The Science, Technology, and Innovation (STI) Policy, 2013seeks to establish a “robust national innovation system" by promoting research and development through public-private partnerships (PPP). Scientific temperament was considered ideal for human resource development, and private sector participation encouraged the establishment of R&D institutes alongside and as equals with government institutions. An attempt was made to revise existing IPR policies for IPR’s developed through PPP. However, no clear roadmap has been drawn to increase “R&D spending to 2% of GDP” yet has influenced notable initiatives like 'Startup India' and 'Make in India'.

Building upon the cybersecurity foundation laid by the NCSP 2013, the Digital India Initiative, launched in 2015, aimed to expand the scope of digital transformation while incorporating the principles of secure and resilient cyberspace established by its predecessor. The Digital India Initiative, launched in 2015, represents a comprehensive effort to transform India into a digitally empowered society and knowledge economy. This flagship program aims to enhance digital infrastructure, expand online services, and promote digital literacy among citizens. It aimed to implement e-governance across all government departments, enhance education (National Education Policy, 2020), healthcare, agriculture, financial inclusion (UPI), and justice delivery systems through technology (IT Intermediaries Guidelines, 2018), and boost domestic electronics manufacturing.

The initiative is built upon nine foundational pillars:

Figure 1. illustrating the Nine Pillars of Digital India



Source: *Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY), Government of India.*

However, the Digital India initiative faces significant challenges like digital illiteracy, particularly in rural and underprivileged areas; poor infrastructural capabilities; digital inaccessibility, etc which creates substantial barriers to digital adoption. Last-mile connectivity is a persistent issue, with over 55,000 villages still deprived of mobile connectivity due to commercial non-viability (ASSOCHAM Deloitte Report). While India has jumped 10 spots in median mobile speeds globally according to an Ookla report (Economic Times, 2023), a survey by VPN brand Surfshark still ranks India as having one of the slowest mobile internet speeds in the world (India Times, 2021). These connectivity issues, along

with internet shutdowns and failures in Aadhaar authentication due to digital illiteracy or internet inaccessibility, significantly impact the initiative's effectiveness (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Furthermore, India's rank of 105 out of 193 member countries in the UN e-Government Development Index and 61 out of 193 in the E-Participation Index as of 2022 indicates substantial room for improvement in digi-governance. Additionally, lack of quality content in local languages, inconsistent electricity supply, inadequate grievance redressal channels to address cybersecurity-related concerns, etc., makes users hesitant to engage in digital services. It must be noted that though Digital India initiative mandates the establishment of Common Service Centers (CSCs) to ensure Public Internet Access, a report by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India highlighted issues of "Deficient planning, delayed implementation and non-resolution of issues" in providing broadband connectivity to CSCs in the Northeast Region and other inaccessible areas, leading to "sub-optimal use and idling of equipment" and rendering expenditure of ₹35.09 crore "unfruitful" (CAG, 2021).

The legal framework of Aadhaar (targeted delivery of financial and other subsidies, benefits and Services Act 2016) assigns unique identification numbers to Indian residents based on biometric and demographic data. It formalises the enrolment procedure for all Indian residents and outlines procedures for authentication. The act set up the statutory body of UIDAI (Unique Identification Authority of India) to oversee the implementation, management and security of personal data of enrolled Aadhaar holders. Despite the stringent provisions and penalties, fears persist about potential breaches and surveillance due to frequent data breaches. Extensive data gathering and mandating linkages of Aadhar with services like PAN cards have faced ethical and legal challenges. Judicial controversy has also surrounded section 33(2), which mandates data disclosure for national security.

Phase IV: Data Rights and Data Protection (2018 onwards)

The fourth phase of development of India's visual policy, set in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution represented by big data automation and the Internet of things, focuses on an evolved Indian approach to all digital. It is centred on the tenets of privacy

rights and data protection (2018 onwards) and seeks to evolve rapidly to suit the modern-day techno-globe's requirements as the country begins to brace itself for industry 5.0. It reflects the balanced approach of technological advancement with data protection, privacy rights and cyber security framework. The techno-industrial revolution, fuelled by cyber-physical systems and smart tech technologies, has brought to the four scalable concerns of digital governance, data ethics, regulation of artificial intelligence and data terrorism.

The National Digital Communications Policy (NDCP, 2018) marked a significant leap taken by the Indian government towards creating a ubiquitous, fast, accessible and secure digital connection to all of India. It set ambitious targets of Universal broadband connectivity with the speed of 50 MBPS to every citizen while reaching a ‘ unique mobile subscriber density’. It brought a pivotal shift towards citizen-centric approach with an emphasis on all-encompassing digital communications rather than the narrow scope of IT industrial transformation. The three primary missions of NDCP were: secure India, propel India and connect India. The policy emphasised emerging technologies, like 5G, AI, the Internet of Things and cloud computing, and committed itself to establishing an exhaustive data protection regime. This policy recognised the importance of net neutrality and stressed on effective and efficient satellite communication, investor enthusiasm, and spectrum management. It stressed the need for effective and efficient "satellite communication", sustainable investments, and "spectrum management" while being marred by limitations like implementation of universal broadband access in the remote uncovered and under-covered areas. It aims to encourage start-ups and SMEs to enter "new and innovative segments and services".

An extensive and strong broadband infrastructure is imperative to realise and monetise the potential of the digitisation of government services. The National Broadband Mission, based on the “principles of “universality, affordability and quality”, was established to fulfil the goals of National Digital Communications Policy, 2018. “Equitable access to broadband services for across the country and especially in rural and remote areas” was

prioritised. A GIS based tool and a National Fiber Grid was proposed. Make in India was given precedence, and a Broadband Readiness Index was decided to be developed to ensure the quality of services. The NBM took into cognisance the role of stakeholders at all levels for implementing the same. However, while infrastructural development gained momentum, effective digital literacy programs were on the back foot. Also, infrastructural development in India has, time and again, favoured the urban regions more than rural areas.

The Information Technology [Intermediaries Guidelines (Amendment) Rules] 2018 designated responsibilities and duties for "online intermediaries" to ensure a secure digital ecosystem. It ratified the publication of "user agreement and privacy policy" by intermediaries in-order to inform users about possible termination of access in case of "non-compliance". Intermediaries must curtail access to "unlawful content" by means of content moderation, employment of tech savvy means of removing "prohibited content" and due reporting to "Grievance Officer" or "nodal contact" to ensure swift action. Preservation of violative content by intermediaries was mandated for a brief period of time to help enable seamless investigation by the state. Nevertheless, the ambiguity in defining terms like "unlawful content" and "actual knowledge" have concerned sceptics regarding the difficulty in balancing digital regulations and individual fundamental rights in the world's largest ungoverned space of the digital.

"Data is the new gold" yet not much emphasis on data rights has been put. Data continues to be the foundational basis of digitisation therefore it is vital to protect and preserve individual data rights and engage in ethical and lawful data privacy and data processing of the same by the state machinery. The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 (DPDPA)serves as the legal framework for data protection, processing and transfers "within India and for Indian residents' data processed abroad". It recognises, conceptualises and legitimises Data Fiduciaries in Chapter II (3 (b) & 8 (4, 5)), Data Principals (Chapter III) and Data Protection Board to facilitate compliance and impose penalties for non-compliance. The act not only grants the individual's right to "access, correct, and erase" personal data but also legitimises

"consent-based processing" of data and provides special protections and provisions for children. However, when compared with global data protection standards, the Digital Personal Data Protection Act faces significant criticisms. It does not cover the right of the citizen to object to data processing by the state in special cases, nor does it allow for data portability as in European countries. Also, no provisions exist for individuals to be exempted from being subjected to "automated decision-making" aided by processes independent of "human intervention". Automated decision-making process uses historical data and predictive algorithms for assessment because of which citizens may potentially be incriminated based on digital records and statistical probabilities.

The Information Technology (Amendment) Bill, 2023 is built upon the Information Technology Act, 2000 but extends its scope and objectives to the address the issues pertaining to social media and its challenges. It introduces key terms pertinent in the contemporary world like "Content" (Section 2, clause a), "Online Account" (Section 2, clause b), "Social Media" (Section 2, clause c)". It proposes penalties for "spreading hateful communal propaganda," and for content that may be "grossly offensive" or a source of "annoyance or inconvenience" as per section 66 G.

Conclusion

This article examines the evolution of India's digiscape from the pre-independence era to the present day by focusing on the role of state policies, civic engagement and market forces. It traces the technological and regulatory trajectory of communication/digital policies from the pre-independence era. India's movement towards digital age has been divided into four distinct phases wherein unique prospects, barriers and setbacks characterise each phase. In this article, the phases have been reviewed using Harold Lasswell's model of "who gets what, when, how" to understand the "politics" of the digital. (1936)

In the first phase, the state exercised its "influence" over the "masses" to enhance its control. The communication infrastructure, while ostensibly aimed at improving basic postal and telecom services for the benefit of the masses, primarily served colonial interest to control, monitor and regulate its

colonies. PSUs and state-owned enterprises dominated the sector in the post-independence, pre-liberalisation era.

The second phase saw massive transformation of the telecom sector with the IT sector boom. The introduction of computer and telecom policies and formulation of the regulatory body, TRAI paved way for the widespread entry of private players into the digital sphere. The private sector was the core beneficiary in this phase.

The third phase aimed to improve digital infrastructure and accessibility to government services for the benefit of the masses. The government, in its pursuit to enhance service delivery, put forth initiatives such as e-governance projects, digital identity systems like Aadhaar, e-KYC, UPI, DigiLocker, etc. and open data platforms like the Open Government Data Platform. Aided by the accumulation of data, targeted service delivery by the state and market forces grew while the need for data rights and data privacy emerged. This period was marked by the emergence of several private players especially in the e-commerce, ed-tech and fintech sectors such as Flipkart and Myntra (2007), Nykaa (2012), Zerodha (2010), Paytm (2010), BharatPe (2018), BYJU'S (2011), Unacademy (2015), etc.

The key turning point of the Indian telecom industry was marked by the launching of Reliance JIO during this period. Critics have pointed that the role of TRAI was skewed in the favour of JIO. The Cellular Operators' Association of India has also criticised TRAI "for creating telecom policies that favour Reliance Jio over other operators". It is alleged that the TRAI revised the definition of "Significant Market Power", extended "network testing periods" and upgraded the "spectrum license" at an unusually lower cost to benefit the company. The Reliance JIO engaged in "Predatory pricing" alleged to have negatively impacted the telecom industry generally and other telecom service providers specifically.The evolution of India's digital landscape has been characterized by a significant shift in power dynamics in the third phase, moving from the state's monopoly to the rise of numerous private entities, and ultimately to the dominance of JIO. The phase since 2018 saw a tripartite approach serving the interests of the state, market and citizens. Initiatives aimed at data localization are given primacy to

ensure the security of the state by enhancing citizens' accessibility to data, limiting foreign control and surveillance, and promoting economic growth. Bodies like the Competition Commission of India were constituted to probe against anticompetitive practices often employed by tech giants. AI and other emerging technologies have played and continue to play a significant role in positioning India "among leaders on the global AI map... to ensure social and inclusive growth in line with the development philosophy of the government." The state machinery engaged in data compilation to build a strong database of its citizens while its policies aimed to protect citizens data rights. The market forces, too, flourished in a data-rich environment. Here, both the state and cross border tech giants became colossal repositories of data. Such concentration of data in the hands of a few powerful and influential entities raises significant concerns.

India witnessed widespread digitisation over the decades, however, how much has India been digitalised is unclear because of the relatively slower transformation of socio-economic processes. Regardless of the growth of digital infrastructure in the country, equitable access to the digital is a far-fetched reality with only 38% of Indian households digitally literate. Digital incompetence and digital inaccessibility have led to the creation of a new form of elites, the digital elites. Such a divide is amplified by the state policies and market forces favouring urban development more. There have also emerged newer forms of digital precarity and vulnerability caused by data breaches and data surveillance. Internet, the new opium of the masses, has been rightly defined as “the first thing that humanity doesn't understand, the largest experiment in anarchy that we have ever had” (Schmidt, 2013).

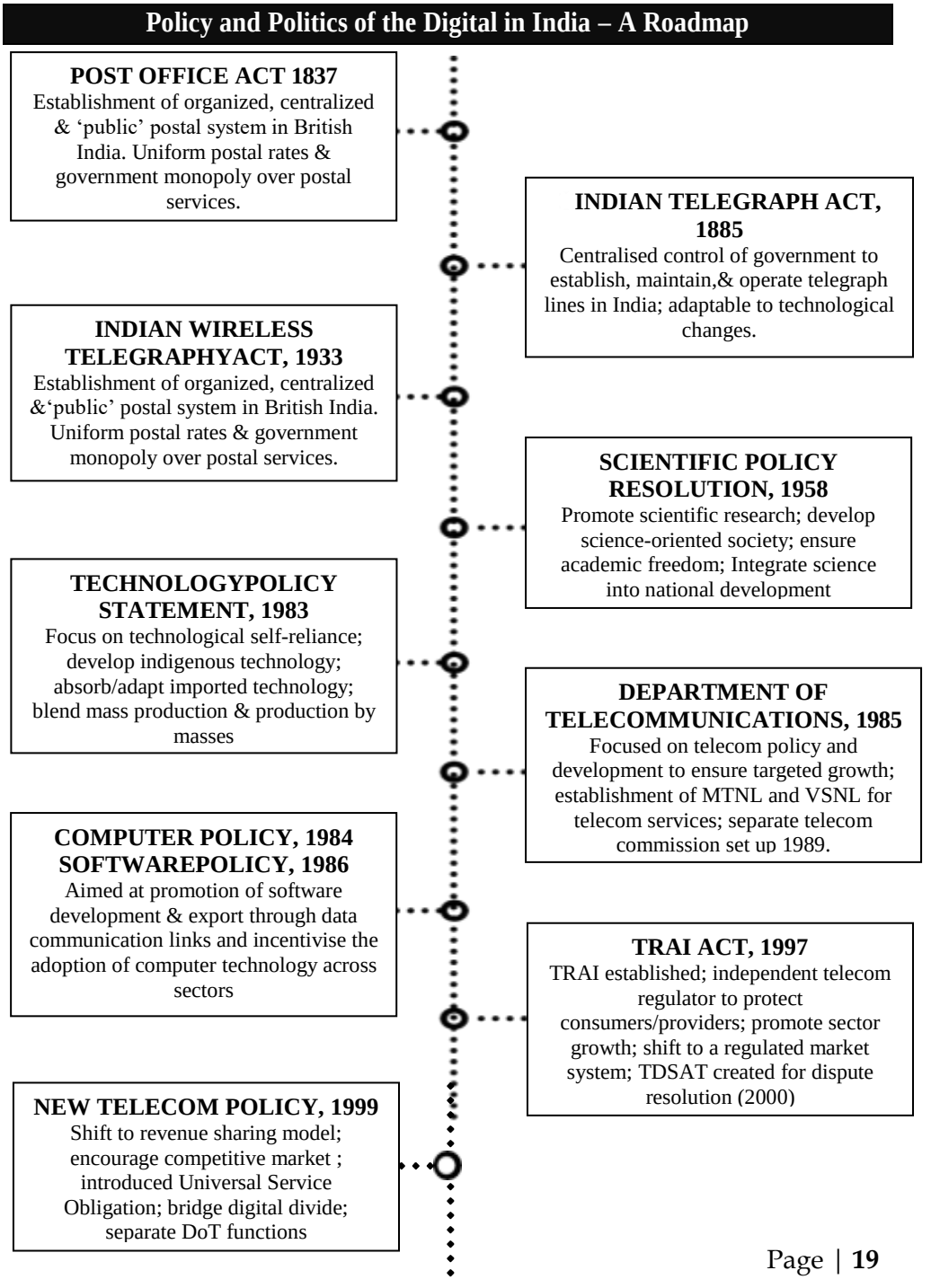
The co-existence of digital capitalism and digital feudalism is emphasised to understand how power and control operate in the digital economy. There are concerns that concentration of power in the hands of a few techno-capitalists turned digital lords could lead to a new economic order. Instead of free market capitalism now, the digital economy resembles the feudal structure of Medieval Europe, where large global companies or corporations like Apple, Meta, Google, Microsoft, Amazon, Alibaba, Wipro, TCS, Infosys dominate the digiscape and act as DigiLords or Digital

lords, controlling digital ecosystem and infrastructure. These DigiLords own and control the digiscape much like the feudal lords of the pre-capitalist era who owned and controlled land and resources. This not only gives the DigiLords immense power to shape and regulate public discourse and democratic processes to their advantage, but users become digital serfs as they rely on these platforms for essential services while engaging in data production.

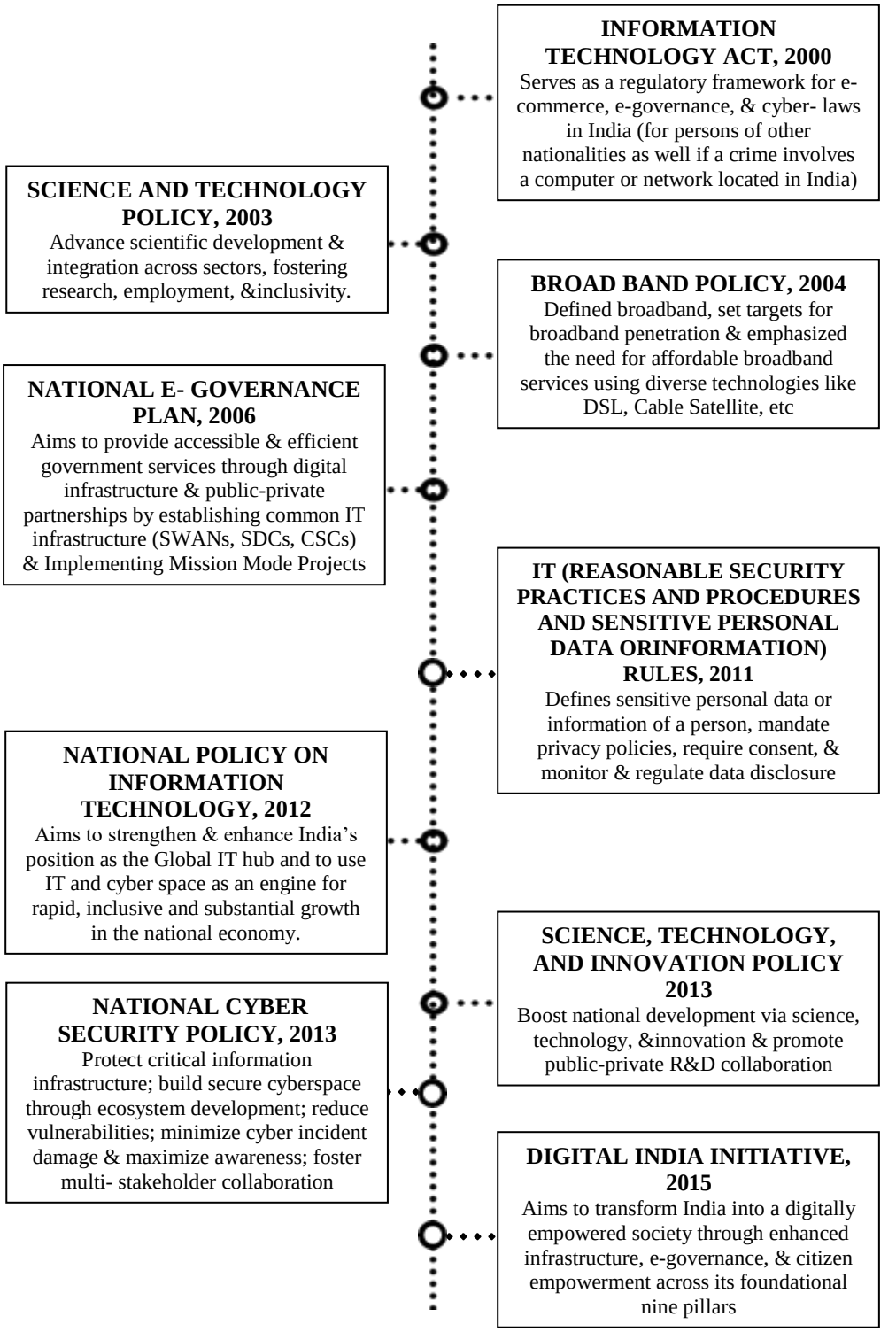
Leading tech firms in India such as, TCS, Wipro, and Infosys, have been authorised to develop, design, operate, and maintain key e-government services such as the Passport Seva Kendra, India Post, IRCTC, Employee State Insurance Corporation and the National Registry of Citizens. As stalwarts of digital transformation in India, these companies serve as intermediaries between the state and its citizens unlike other consumer-facing platforms like Facebook or Google. Digital serfs or DigiSerfs willingly provide free valuable data and mandatory content in the form of personal details, browsing habits and content creation in exchange. Personal sensitive data so provided by the user, becomes a commodity to be appropriated by DigiLords. Thus, real power today lies with tech giants and the state, who are in possession of Big Data, thereby leading to a newer form of imperialism by means of digital colonisation and surveillance capitalism. Therefore, the policies must address issues of privacy, data exploitation and surveillance. Technofeudalism has also led to the rise in gig economy wherein DigiSerfs are subject to precarious work condition because of algorithmic management and rating systems as in Ola, Zomato, Swiggy, etc. Digital serfdom is enabled through cronyism as data lordism of the capitalists exists but government in India is the sole authorised regulator. Hence, ethical data security measures must be established by the state to mitigate data breaches. A balance of power between governmental and market influences should be maintained to ensure a continuum between the digital policy and the politics (Horowitz, 2018). Policymakers must develop legislations which are adaptable and forward-thinking so that citizen-centric technological advancement can be prioritised while protecting digital rights and advancing digital sovereignty.

The technological and regulatory trajectory of digital transformation in India has been traced by the authors through a roadmap as given in following figure 2:

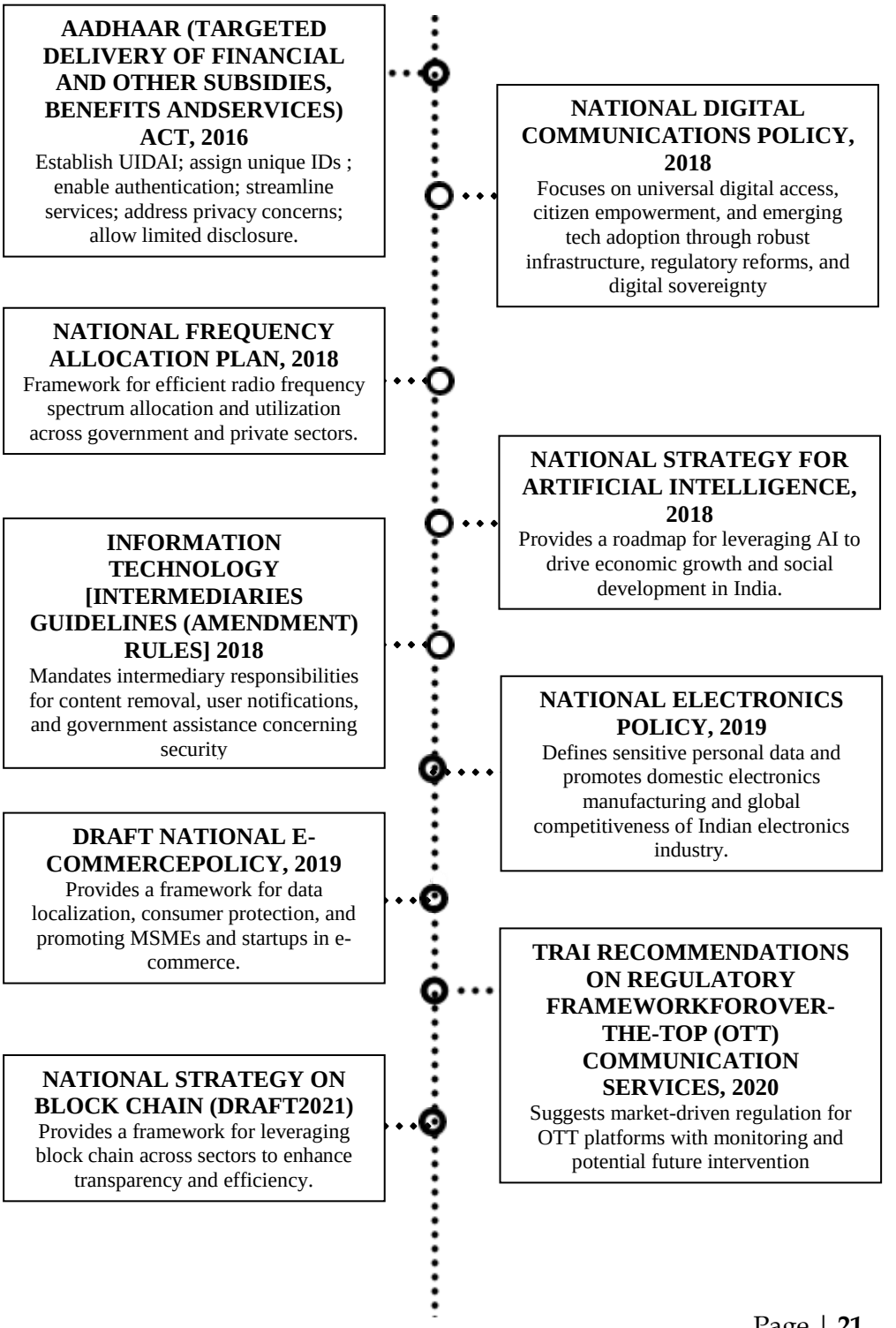
Figure 2



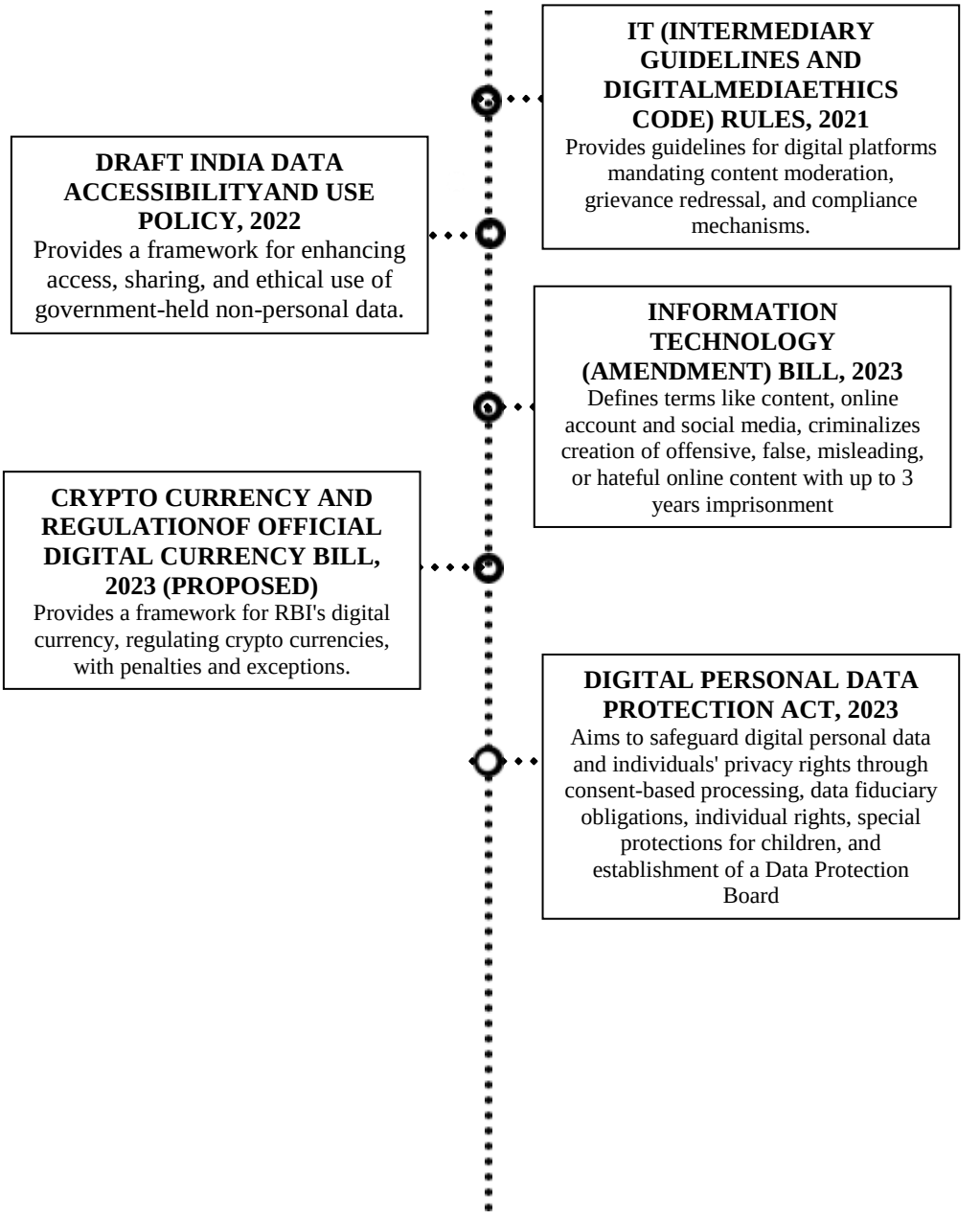
Policy and Politics of the Digital in India – A Roadmap



Policy and Politics of the Digital in India – A Roadmap



Policy and Politics of the Digital in India – A Roadmap



Note

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Figure Legends

Figure 1. Nine Pillars of Digital India

The figure outlines the core focus areas of the Digital India program, organized into three columns of interconnected pillars.

Figure 2. Technological and Regulatory Trajectory Roadmap in India

The figure illustrates a chronological roadmap marking the transformation of digital policy and politics in India through major legislative acts, policies, and initiatives. The timeline progresses chronologically and enactments are marked by blue/white dots. The movement of transition is shown with the help of connecting lines. Each entry includes the year of implementation and a brief description.

Research Article

GENDER DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY KASHMIR: A MULTIFACETED EXPLORATION

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Anil Kumar*

Abstract
This article presents an in-depth sociological analysis of gender discrimination against women in the Kashmir Valley. Kashmir is a region where the intersection of history, politics, and culture has definitely contributed towards shaping the lived experiences of women. Situated within a context shaped established patriarchal traditions, the study interrogates how gender inequality becomes embedded in everyday social practices and institutional frameworks. Based on a qualitative research methodology integrating detailed case studies conducted between 2022 and 2023, this study reveals how discrimination manifests in both subtle, normalized ways and overt, institutionalized mechanisms. By examining the interconnections among historico-political spans, religio-cultural norms, and socio-economic hierarchies, the paper emphasizes the multiple and overlapping forces that sustain women's marginalization. Furthermore, it illuminates how patriarchal authority constrains women's autonomy and access to education, healthcare, and employment while perpetuating cycles of exclusion and disempowerment that transcend generations. The article critically evaluates the effectiveness of existing legal and policy frameworks addressing gender inequality in Kashmir, underlining persistent gaps between legislative intent and practical implementation that limit women's access to justice. The research also examines the roles of civil society organizations, grassroots movements, and individual agency in both challenging and, at times, inadvertently reinforcing discriminatory practices. The findings highlight the need for a holistic, culturally sensitive, and

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multi-stakeholder approach to dismantle ingrained gender discrimination. The article concludes with targeted recommendations, including policy interventions, community engagement, and public awareness campaigns. The overarching objective is to empower women, challenge traditional gender norms, and promote an inclusive environment that upholds women's rights and dignity. This research, based on empirical data from the Valley, significantly frames a sociological discourse on gender and rights, and calls for transformative action by stakeholders at all levels.

Keywords
Gender Discrimination, Patriarchal Norms, Women's Empowerment, Legal Frameworks, Intersectionality, Islamic Ethics

Introduction: The Contested Terrain of Gender in Kashmir

Kashmir is widely recognized for its natural topography, yet this recognition frequently obscures the complex gender dynamics present within its society. Historical, cultural, religious, and social factors collectively shape women's experiences in the region. This article examines persistent gender discrimination affecting women in public institutions and private households. Despite formal guarantees of equality in the Indian Constitution and international agreements, systemic biases, patriarchal norms, and a substantial gap between legal provisions and lived realities continue to impact many Kashmiri women.

This research employs qualitative case studies conducted between 2022 and 2023 in both urban and rural areas of the Kashmir Valley, with all respondent names and organizational details anonymized to protect participants' identities. These case studies present a critical understanding of the diverse challenges faced by women, accentuating both their struggles and resilience. The persistence of discrimination, despite legal reforms, necessitates an assessment of whether formal equality has effectively addressed the rooted societal prejudices. The situation in Kashmir exemplifies this pattern within a specific context, as Nussbaum (2000) observes, women are frequently treated as means to the ends of others.

This research aims to document the experiences of women as they helm the complex and often contradictory dynamics of contemporary Kashmiri society. The study investigates multiple

layers of discrimination within corporate environments, government institutions, and family settings. The case studies identify economic exploitation, workplace harassment, psychological violence, and restrictive cultural norms as prevalent forms of discrimination. The central research question explores how socio-cultural, religious, and economic structures in Kashmir interact to produce and legitimize gender discrimination, and seeks to identify culturally appropriate pathways for empowerment and social transformation.

The complexity of gender discrimination in Kashmir is heightened by the contrast between Islamic principles, which advocate justice and equality, and prevailing patriarchal interpretations. Despite increased emphasis on equal rights in both global and local discourses, significant tension persists between religious ideals and customary practices. This article examines this dissonance, analyzing how the core teachings of Islamic gender justice are frequently overshadowed by tradition. The study seeks to contribute to the discourse on gender in Kashmir and to broader interdisciplinary understandings of persisting inequality.

Theoretical Framework: Intersectionality, Patriarchal Bargains, and the Ethics of Justice

To fully comprehend the complicated and layered discrimination faced by Kashmiri women, it is essential to employ a sophisticated theoretical lens that can account for multiple, overlapping systems of power and identity. The concept of intersectionality, coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), provides this essential framework. Intersectionality posits that systems of oppression, such as gender, class, ethnicity, religion, and political affiliation, are not distinct and separate; they are interconnected and mutually constitutive. They cannot be examined in isolation because their effects compound and transform one another. In Kashmir, a woman's identity is invariably situated at the crossroads of multiple, overlapping identities: she is not only a woman but also a Kashmiri, often Muslim, and located within a specific class, caste, and regional hierarchy (Kazi, 2017). The experience of discrimination for an educated, urban woman from a professional family in Srinagar will differ significantly, and in

fundamental ways, from that of a rural, uneducated artisan from a remote village. An intersectional analysis prevents the homogenization of "Kashmiri women" and allows for a more precise understanding of how different axes of identity shape distinct experiences of privilege and subordination.

Furthermore, Kandiyoti's (1988) seminal concept of "patriarchal bargains" is instrumental in understanding the complex and often painful dynamics within households and among women themselves. Deniz Kandiyoti argues that women are not merely passive victims of patriarchy; they are active agents who, operating within a constraining patriarchal system, negotiate and strategize to maximize their security, power, and life options. This sometimes leads to their complicity in perpetuating the very system that oppresses them, as seen in cases where mothers-in-law, aunts, or senior female relatives enforce discriminatory norms against younger women, such as in the cases of Mehwish and Khalida presented later. This framework helps explain the complex and morally ambiguous phenomenon of "women discriminating against women," moving beyond simplistic notions of universal sisterhood to a more nuanced and perhaps more honest understanding of power, survival, and resistance within severely constrained environments. It reveals how patriarchy operates not just through male domination but also through the internalization of its logics by women who then police other women.

Finally, it is crucial to introduce the framework of Islamic ethics concerning gender justice. The Quranic worldview and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) introduced revolutionary reforms in 7th-century Arabia, granting women rights to inheritance, property, and consent in marriage that were unprecedented for the time. The ethical spirit of Islam emphasizes the equality of all human beings before God and the principles of justice (adl) and compassion (rahmah). Contemporary scholars like Kecia Ali (2014) and Amina Wadud (1999) have engaged in feminist exegesis, reinterpreting Islamic texts to argue for a more equitable framework that distinguishes between the religion's core egalitarian principles and the patriarchal customs of the societies in which it is practiced. In the context of Kashmir, a predominantly Muslim society, this creates a potent discursive

field where appeals for women's rights can be, and often are, grounded in Islamic ethics, challenging the patriarchal interpretations that have historically held sway. This theological perspective is vital for any meaningful engagement with the community on issues of reform and equality.

Discrimination Against Women in the Workplace: The Economic Architecture of Inequality

Both the formal and informal economic sectors in Kashmir reflect and reinforce broader societal gender inequalities. The case studies presented in this research document a spectrum of discriminatory practices, including overt pay disparities, unfair dismissals, social exclusion, and sexual harassment. Collectively, these practices constitute an economic structure that systematically restricts women's financial autonomy and professional advancement.

Case Study 1: Farzana and the Persistent Pay Gap

Farzana, a highly qualified postgraduate with first-class credentials, successfully secured a position at a private bank in Srinagar. However, during the hiring process, she learned through informal channels that a male colleague with lesser qualifications and significantly less relevant experience was offered a higher starting salary for a comparable role. When she questioned this disparity with the human resources department, management offered vague, unconvincing justifications for "role fit," "future leadership potential," and "negotiation skills." Compelled by acute familial financial pressures, Farzana reluctantly accepted the lower offer, a decision that left her feeling both professionally devalued and personally frustrated. This case is a classic illustration of the gender pay gap, a well-documented global phenomenon that remains stubbornly persistent in Kashmir. It reflects a deep-seated cognitive bias that systematically undervalues women's labour and contributions, often underpinned by the unexamined assumption that men are the primary breadwinners and are thus more deserving of higher compensation (Weichselbaumer & Winter-Ebmer, 2005). This form of economic discrimination has direct and long-term

consequences, affecting a woman's financial autonomy, pension savings, and overall sense of self-worth and professional standing.

Case Study 2: Ruquma and the Impenetrable Glass Ceiling

Ruquma, a dedicated and competent executive in a private manufacturing firm, reported a consistent and demoralizing pattern of being passed over for promotions in favour of male colleagues. She noted with perceptive insight, "The promotion criteria seemed to shift and become nebulous when it came to female employees. For men, it was about potential; for us, it was about proven performance, which was never quite proven enough." Furthermore, she was systematically excluded from key informal communication channels, such as the WhatsApp groups where male colleagues discussed crucial work strategies, client management, and upcoming opportunities. This deliberate exclusion from "informal networks" is a well-documented barrier to career advancement in organizational sociology, creating a "glass ceiling," an invisible yet impenetrable barrier that prevents qualified women from reaching senior leadership positions (Cotter et al., 2001). The continued privileging of male employees for high-profile opportunities such as foreign tours and international training programs serves to entrench this inequality, effectively limiting women's professional growth, network expansion, and exposure to global best practices.

Case Study 3: Shafeeqa and Maternity as a Professional Liability

Shafeeqa, a diligent employee at an automotive sales company in Hyderpora, Srinagar, was summarily terminated from her position precisely when she was nine months pregnant. Upon formally submitting a request for a three-month maternity leave, which was her legal right under the Maternity Benefit Act, her female boss informed her, in a cold, matter-of-fact manner, that her absence would create an "unmanageable workload" and result in financial losses for the company. She was told bluntly that she was "of no use to the company" in her pregnant condition. This blatant case of maternity-based discrimination discloses the fundamental conflict that patriarchal capitalist systems create

between women's biological reproductive roles and their economic participation in the workforce. As noted by Kumar (2012) in his analysis of pregnancy and patriarchy, the female body, in its capacity for reproduction, is often constructed as a liability within the productivity-oriented logic of the market, "putting the freedom of women in question." Despite legal protections, employers often view pregnancy as an inconvenient disruption, forcing women into an impossible choice between their career aspirations and their right to motherhood (Bhalotra& Umaña-Aponte, 2010). This practice disproportionately and uniquely affects women, thereby reinforcing their primary social identity as caregivers rather than as professionals and economic agents.

Case Study 4: Insha and the Hostile Work Environment

Insha, a committed social worker at a local NGO, endured a prolonged and terrifying period of sexual harassment from her male supervisor. His predatory behaviour included insisting on late-night calls under the pretext of urgent work, demanding that she keep her personal phone switched off to avoid scrutiny from her family, strategically rearranging the office layout to place her desk uncomfortably and intimidatingly close to his, and engaging in unwelcome and invasive physical contact under the guise of friendly pats. The situation only abated when she, after months of silent suffering, mustered the immense courage to formally report him to a higher authority, leading to her transfer to another department. Insha's harrowing experience stresses the grim prevalence of sexual harassment, a pernicious manifestation of gendered power dynamics that uses sexuality as a tool of intimidation, control, and subordination. While the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 (the POSH Act) provides a comprehensive legal framework, as Kumar (2020) and Chawla (2024) critically examine, its implementation in many (Kashmiri) organizations remains weak, inconsistent, and often subject to the whims of management. Victims, like Insha, frequently fear severe professional reprisals, social stigma, and damage to their reputation, which creates a powerful culture of silence and impunity.

Case Study 5: Rafiya and the Systemic Devaluation of Traditional Labour

Rafiya, a highly skilled needleworker from a rural background, represents the struggles of countless women in the informal and artisan sectors, whose contributions remain largely invisible in formal economic metrics. Her craft, which demands immense precision, patience, artistic skill, and years of training, is systematically and grossly undercompensated. "The payment I receive does not even begin to justify the hours of back-breaking, eye-straining work I put in," she laments. This exploitation is facilitated by a chain of middlemen and exporters who capture the bulk of the profit from international sales, leaving the actual artisan, the creator of the value, with a pittance. This economic exploitation is a serious form of discrimination that devalues traditionally female-dominated crafts, viewing them as hobbies or supplemental income rather than as serious professions. This keeps women in a cycle of poverty and financial dependence, sabotaging their economic agency (Gangoli, 2024). The global market for Kashmiri handicrafts thrives on the romanticized image of the artisan, while the material reality for women like Rafiya is one of precarity and exploitation.

Case Study 6: Sameera and Vertical Hostility in the Public Sector

Sameera's troubling experience within a state government department illustrates that discrimination is not confined to the profit-driven private sector. Her female superior, a woman in a position of some authority, subjected her to consistent harsh treatment, public rudeness, and, most alarmingly, the repeated and unauthorized withholding of her salary for minor and often fabricated infractions. This blatant deviation from established bureaucratic norms and labour laws points to a toxic culture where positional power can be abused with impunity, regardless of the gender of the abuser. It effectively challenges the optimistic assumption that female leadership automatically encourages a more equitable and supportive environment for junior women. Instead, it suggests that patriarchal and authoritarian

organizational cultures can be effectively perpetuated and enacted by individuals of any gender, a phenomenon sometimes termed "vertical hostility" or the "queen bee" syndrome, where a woman in authority distances herself from and undermines other women to secure her own position in a male-dominated hierarchy (Derks et al., 2016).

Legal Frameworks and Their Discontents: The Chasm Between Law and Lived Reality

The Indian Constitution provides a remarkably robust and progressive foundation for gender equality. Article 14 guarantees the right to equality before the law, Article 15 explicitly prohibits the state from discriminating on grounds of sex, and Article 16 ensures equality of opportunity in matters of public employment. Specific legislation, such as the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976, and the more recent and comprehensive POSH Act, 2013, is designed to combat the very forms of workplace discrimination described in the preceding case studies.

However, a significant and troubling chasm exists between "law on the books and law in action," a gap that is particularly pronounced in the context of Kashmir. A primary structural limitation is the circumscribed jurisdiction of many central labour laws, which often apply only to enterprises employing a specific minimum number of workers. This automatically excludes a vast majority of women, such as Rafiya, the needleworker, who are concentrated in the informal, unorganized sector, where there is no defined employer-employee relationship. While the Unorganized Workers' Social Security Act, 2008, was enacted with great promise to address this critical gap, its implementation on the ground has been widely criticized as lethargic, ineffective, and failing to provide meaningful social security to its intended beneficiaries (Shyam Sundar, 2020).

The philosophical concept of substantive equality is crucial for understanding what a more effective legal response would entail. Formal equality, which insists on treating everyone the same, often fails to address historical and structural disadvantages. It ignores the very real differences in social starting points. Substantive equality, in contrast, requires that these differences

be actively taken into account to achieve genuinely equitable outcomes (Fredman, 2016). This philosophy justifies and necessitates gender-specific policies such as reservations or quotas. Several Indian states have instituted horizontal reservations for women in government jobs; a similar proactive policy could be genuinely transformative in Jammu and Kashmir, ensuring a critical mass of women in public service. The Supreme Court of India has consistently upheld such measures, noting in landmark judgments that special provisions for women are not discriminatory but are, in fact, essential instruments to overcome their cumulative social and economic backwardness (Air India v. Nergesh Meerza, 1981).

The long-pending proposal for a national Equal Employment Opportunities Commission (EEOC), envisioned as a powerful statutory body to address discrimination in both public and private sectors, could be a potential game-changer. Its mandate was designed to extend beyond gender to include caste, religion, disability, and other grounds, making it a comprehensive and dedicated redressal mechanism (Government of India, 2008). However, this visionary proposal remains in draft form, a casualty of administrative inertia.

In the specific socio-legal context of Kashmir, personal laws and localized customary practices have been a persistent zone of contention and struggle. Critics argue that certain interpretations of these laws, influenced more by local custom than by pure religious doctrine, systematically disadvantage women in critical matters of inheritance, marriage, divorce, and guardianship (Kazi, 2017). For instance, despite progressive Supreme Court pronouncements affirming the rights of daughters to ancestral property, customary practices in various parts of Kashmir often effectively deprive them of their rightful share, with property almost exclusively devolving to male heirs. This legal pluralism creates a complex, often paralyzing scenario for women, in which universal constitutional rights guaranteed by the state clash with community-specific personal laws, leaving them in a vulnerable legal limbo. The struggle for gender justice, therefore, must also engage with the difficult task of reforming and reinterpreting these

personal laws from within an Islamic framework, emphasizing the Quran's original intent to grant women economic rights.

Health and Discrimination: A Syndemic of Neglect and Bias

The health sector in Kashmir reveals some of the striking gender-based disparities, shaped by a combination of grave infrastructural deficits, resource allocation failures, and powerful socio-cultural norms. The World Health Organization (WHO) has long acknowledged that gender is a critical social determinant of health, with women often facing disadvantages throughout their lives due to a syndemic of inequities in education, income, social power, and gender-based violence (WHO, 2021).

The public healthcare infrastructure in Jammu & Kashmir is in a state of chronic crisis. According to data from the National Sample Survey Office (2014), the doctor-patient ratio in the region was a dismal 1:3866. This figure is not only substantially worse than the already strained national average of 1:2000 but also stands as a clear contrast to the WHO's recommended standard of 1:1000. This systemic failure disproportionately and devastatingly affects women, whose health needs, particularly those related to reproduction, are more continuous and specialized. A recent performance audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India revealed a staggering 46% deficit in specialist doctors, including gynecologists, pediatricians, and anesthetists, at critical Community Health Centres (CHCs) and Sub-District Hospitals (SDHs) across the Union Territory. This crippling shortage means that basic but essential gynecological, obstetric, and pediatric care is simply unavailable at the local level for a vast number of women (Khan & Pathak, 2022).

The direct consequence of this collapse is an excessive and unsustainable burden on the few tertiary care hospitals located in Srinagar. As reported by a few studies, like Peerzada (2024), even patients with minimal obstetric risks are routinely referred to Lal Ded Hospital, the sole tertiary care maternity hospital in the city. This leads to overwhelming patient loads, dangerously overworked and exhausted medical staff, and prohibitively long waiting times. These conditions, in turn, severely compromise the quality and dignity of care and put patients at avoidable risk. For a woman in

labour from a remote village in Kupwara or Kulgam, this logistical nightmare, involving long and difficult travel while in a critical medical state, can become a matter of life and death. This is a clear and tragic example of how systemic neglect constitutes a form of structural discrimination against women.

Beyond the tangible issues of infrastructure, more subtle forms of gender bias directly affect health-seeking behaviour and health outcomes. Deeply ingrained cultural norms of modesty (*purdah*) often discourage women from seeking consultation from male doctors, of whom there is a majority, for gynecological or other sensitive issues. The persistent preference for male children can lead to the neglect of a daughter's health and nutrition from a young age. The relative lack of autonomy for women in household decision-making, including decisions about their own bodies, often means that their health concerns are deprioritized until they become severe emergencies. Furthermore, the psychological distress experienced by women, aggravated by the constant threat of violence, and the pressures of domestic life, constitutes another significant but largely unaddressed dimension of women's health in the region (Malhotra & Raza, 2019). The focus on overt, physical manifestations of gender inequality often obscures these more subtle, yet pervasively corrosive, forms of discrimination that have a cumulative and debilitating impact on a woman's physical, mental, and emotional well-being over her entire lifespan.

It is also pertinent to note the sometimes restrictive judicial interpretation of discrimination in this context. The Kerala High Court, in the case of *Dr. Prasad Pannian v. Central University of Kerala* (2018), made a significant distinction by ruling that mere gender-based discrimination in service matters, such as being denied promotion, does not, by itself, constitute the specific offence of 'sexual harassment' under the POSH Act. This legal delineation highlights the pressing need for specific, strong, and standalone anti-discrimination laws. Such laws should address the full spectrum of biased and inequitable treatment faced by women, and not just the sexualized or overtly violent forms of such treatment. The absence of such a comprehensive law leaves many women like Farzana and Ruquma without a clear legal remedy for the non-sexualized discrimination they face.

Women Discriminating Against Women: The Complexities of the Patriarchal Bargain

Perhaps the most complex, psychologically damaging, and socially divisive forms of discrimination occur within the familial sphere, and are at times perpetrated by other women who are themselves embedded within the same patriarchal system. The following case studies, drawn from intensive field research across various localities of Srinagar, illustrate with painful clarity how patriarchal norms are internalized, rationalized, and enforced by women, a phenomenon powerfully explained by Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of the "patriarchal bargain."

Case Study 7: Mehwish's Struggle Against Inherited Patriarchy

Mehwish, a 26-year-old ambitious professional working in the local office of a reputed multinational company in Srinagar, faces a particularly insidious form of discrimination orchestrated by her own grandmother. The elderly woman's pronounced and unshakeable preference for male heirs manifests in a daily regimen of constant criticism, stringent restrictions on Mehwish's clothing choices and social interactions, and, most disturbingly, unwarranted physical punishment for minor or imagined transgressions. This deep-seated bias even extends to subtle mockery of Mehwish's professional achievements in the workplace, damaging her confidence. This case demonstrates with graphic clarity how patriarchal values are transmitted intergenerationally. The grandmother, having internalized the logic of a classic patrilineal system where sons are seen as the providers of old-age security and the carriers of the family name, while daughters are perceived as a temporary liability (*parayadhan*, or someone else's wealth), actively polices and enforces restrictive gender norms for the next generation. She views Mehwish's modernity, economic independence, and assertiveness as a direct threat to the traditional familial honour and the established social order that has defined her own life.

Case Study 8: Farzana's Struggle Against Workplace Jealousy

In a different context, Farzana (a different individual from Case Study 1), who works in the Government Department of Fisheries, faces persistent harassment not from a male superior, but from a female colleague, XYZ. This colleague's behaviour began with ragging when Farzana was a newcomer, escalated to seizing her personal belongings like her mobile phone, and actively creating a hostile environment by spreading rumours and discouraging other female staff from communicating with Farzana. This behaviour appears rooted in a psychology of scarcity and internalized misogyny. In a system with limited opportunities for career advancement for women, some individuals may perceive other competent women not as potential allies but as direct competitors for the few available slots of recognition, promotion, and power. This "queen bee" syndrome, where a woman in a position of authority or seeking authority distances herself from and undermines other women, can be understood as a coping mechanism within an overarching patriarchal structure. By aligning herself with the dominant male culture and rejecting solidarity with other women, the perpetrator may believe she is enhancing her own status and security (Derks et al., 2016).

Case Study 9: Mona's Battle Against Psychological Violence

Mona, a 21-year-old student pursuing her Bachelor of Arts, endures sustained psychological violence at the hands of her maternal aunt. Following her parents' divorce, Mona lives with her maternal grandmother, where her aunt subjects her to a regime of emotional abuse. This includes denying her proper meals, subjecting her to constant verbal insults and belittlement, and systematically undermining her decision-making autonomy on matters as simple as choosing her own clothes. This is a clear and distressing case of emotional and psychological abuse aimed deliberately at diminishing Mona's sense of self-worth and agency. It highlights how women, particularly in joint family structures, can wield power over other, more vulnerable women, reinforcing internal family hierarchies based on marital status, lineage, and generational authority. Mona's narrative aligns with broader societal challenges, emphasizing the critical need for open communication about mistreatment within families and the

cultivation of compassion to improve fractured family and social relationships.

Case Study 10: Nuzhat's Struggle in a Discriminatory Marital Ecosystem

Nuzhat, a 54-year-old mother and housewife, has endured decades of emotional turmoil and neglect due to her husband's open extramarital affair. While the Supreme Court of India decriminalized adultery in the landmark *Joseph Shine v. Union of India* (2018) judgment, it remains a potent ground for divorce and represents an unbearable betrayal and a violation of marital trust. Nuzhat's story reveals the indirect discrimination women face within the institution of marriage. Social and economic pressures, the stigma associated with divorce, the lack of independent financial resources, and concerns for the welfare of children often make it extremely difficult for women to leave unfaithful or emotionally abusive partners. This effectively traps them in extremely damaging and humiliating situations for the sake of social propriety and precarious financial security. Her experience prompts a sober reflection on the societal norms and legal frameworks that continue to disadvantage women within intimate relationships, even as laws modernize.

Case Study 11: Khalida's Struggle against the Tyranny of Tradition

Khalida, now a 50-year-old woman employed with a non-governmental organization, offers a deeply unsettling account of how patriarchal traditions continue to dictate women's lives in the Kashmir Valley. Her recollections of early marital life vividly expose the gendered cruelty embedded within domestic spaces. While the first few days of marriage are customarily celebrated in Kashmir as a period of tenderness and seclusion, locally referred to as *"satan dohan hinz mahrin"* (the bride of the first seven days), for Khalida it became a time of humiliation and violence. Her "seven days of comfort" turned into what she calls "the harsh first seven days." She recounts relentless taunts from her mother-in-law and sister-in-law for bringing what they deemed an "inadequate" dowry and, later, for bearing two daughters rather

than a male child. In one particularly harrowing incident, her sister-in-law hurled a steaming tea-sheet at her, an act of physical aggression that sought to discipline and domesticate her into compliance. Such violence was not incidental but functioned as a ritualized assertion of hierarchy, an initiation that reaffirmed the authority of senior women and reinforced the patrilocal household's control over the new bride. This normalization of abuse reveals how gendered subordination is sustained through intimate acts of everyday power. As Kumar (2019) notes in "Problematising Gender and Issues of Inequality," the persistence of such practices demonstrates that justice within the family remains an unfulfilled aspiration, necessitating a profound rethinking of how authority, care, and equality are structured within the private sphere.

Conclusion: Synthesizing the Layers of Discrimination and Charting a Path Forward

The evidence presented in this article demonstrates that gender equality in contemporary Kashmir is characterized by complexity and multiple layers of discrimination. Discrimination against women is not a singular phenomenon; rather, it is interconnected and operates across several domains, resulting in persistent constraints.

1. **The Economic Front:** Discrimination manifests through persistent pay gaps, denial of promotions, maternity-based discrimination, and the systemic devaluation of women's labour in both the formal corporate sector and the informal artisan economy.
2. **The Legal and Policy Front:** It operates through the critical gap between progressive legislation and its weak, inconsistent implementation, and through the continued tensions between universal constitutional rights and discriminatory personal or customary practices that are often defended in the name of culture or religion.
3. **The Health Front:** It is evident in a crumbling and underfunded public health infrastructure that fails to meet women's specific needs, and in cultural norms that

systematically deprioritize their physical and mental well-being.

4. **The Socio-cultural and Interpersonal Front:** It is perpetuated through the internalization and active enforcement of patriarchal norms by family members, including other women, leading to psychological violence, physical abuse, and restrictive control within the domestic sphere, the very place that should be a sanctuary.

The effects of multifaceted discrimination are far-reaching. These forms of discrimination isolate women, undermine self-esteem and mental health, compromise physical well-being, limit life opportunities, and restrict societal participation. A pervasive culture of silence persists, as victims often fear professional reprisals, social exclusion, or familial disruption.

Recommendations: Towards a Holistic and Culturally-Grounded Approach

Addressing entrenched and multifaceted discrimination requires a coordinated, multi-level, and culturally informed strategy that moves beyond superficial measures to address underlying causes.

1. Strengthened Policy and Legal Interventions:

- **Robust Implementation:** The Jammu & Kashmir administration must treat the enforcement of existing laws, such as the POSH Act and the Maternity Benefit Act, as a top governance priority. This requires mandatory, recurring training for employers and managers, the establishment of fully functional and independent Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs) in all eligible institutions, and swift, transparent judicial action against violators to build trust in the system.
- **Enacting Proactive Legislation:** The long-pending proposal for a national Equal Employment Opportunities Commission (EEOC) should be enacted without further delay. At the Union Territory level, a policy of substantive equality, such as legislating a significant quota (e.g., 33%) for women in all state government jobs and local bodies, should be seriously debated and implemented to ensure women's representation in public life.

- **Health Sector Revamp and Gender Mainstreaming:** Urgent, targeted public investment is needed to bridge infrastructure and human resource gaps. This includes creating attractive incentive packages for specialist doctors to serve in rural areas, upgrading district hospitals with modern obstetric and gynecological care facilities, and launching targeted public health campaigns focused on women's health literacy, nutrition, and mental well-being. Gender budgeting should be applied to all health sector plans.

2. Deepened Community Engagement and Critical Awareness:

- **Grassroots Mobilization and Faith-Based Dialogue:** Collaborate with and strengthen local civil society organizations, women's collectives, and religious scholars (ulema) who advocate for a gender-just interpretation of Islamic principles. Support community-led dialogues and workshops that use Islamic sources to challenge regressive gender norms and practices like dowry and son-preference, framing the issue not as a rejection of culture but as a return to its ethical core.
- **Educational Reforms from School to University:** Integrate gender sensitization, human rights education, and critical thinking skills into school and college curricula from an early age. Education should promote values of empathy, equality, and mutual respect to combat the insecurities and internalized biases that lead to discrimination, including the phenomenon of women discriminating against women.
- **Strategic Engagement of Men and Boys:** Gender equality cannot be achieved by focusing solely on women. It is imperative to design and fund programs that specifically engage men and boys as partners, allies, and stakeholders in challenging patriarchal norms and redefining masculinities in positive, non-oppressive ways.

3. Empowerment and Sustainable Support Mechanisms:

- **Widespread Legal Literacy Campaigns:** Launch widespread, accessible, and multi-lingual campaigns using radio, social media, and community meetings to inform women of their legal rights in the workplace, family, and society. Knowing one's rights is the fundamental first step toward confidently claiming them.

- **Economic Empowerment with Fairness:** Provide enhanced institutional support for women in the informal sector by establishing transparent supply chains, ensuring fair trade certification and practices, facilitating direct market access through e-commerce platforms, and offering continuous skill-upgradation programs. Actively promote and fund women-led entrepreneurship through streamlined credit facilities and business development services.
- **Establishing Robust Psycho-Social Support Systems:** Establish and adequately fund a network of crisis centres, counselling services, and legal aid cells specifically for women facing discrimination and violence in all its forms. Creating safe, confidential, and non-judgmental spaces for women to share their experiences, access professional support, and rebuild their lives is absolutely vital.

In conclusion, dismantling entrenched structures of gender discrimination in Kashmir requires sustained effort, cultural sensitivity, and collective commitment from the state, civil society, religious leaders, communities, families, and individuals. Progress depends on moving beyond rhetoric to implement meaningful, collaborative, and accountable actions that empower Kashmiri women as active agents and equal partners in society. The resilience and strength of Kashmiri women are evident, and it is the responsibility of society and the state to create conditions that enable this resilience to achieve full citizenship and equality.

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Review Article

SHAIVISM AND SUFISM IN KASHMIR: LAL DED AND NANDA RISHI'S CONCEPTIONS OF SYNCRETIC CULTURE IN KASHMIR

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Abstract

The paper begins by providing an overview of Kashmir Shaivism, tracing its origins. Lal Ded is a distinguished female Shaiva saint of Kashmir, whose poetic expressions or 'vaakhs' are foundational to the Kashmiri language. This article highlights how Lal Ded's spiritual journey was influenced by Hindu Shaivism and Sufism, leading to a unique synthesis of these traditions in her teachings. The research article also examines the philosophical and cultural syncretism between Shaivism and Sufism in Kashmir, focusing on the lives and teachings of two influential figures: Lal Ded and Nanda Rishi. The present paper highlights the significance of Nanda Rishi, a Kashmiri Rishi who was wrongly portrayed as a proselytiser, but was a true humanist dedicated to meditation and pursuing higher spiritual ascension. The paper emphasises the importance of the Rishi movement in shaping the cultural and religious landscape of Kashmir, as well as its role in the spread of Islam through a Sufi tradition that was distinct from the orthodox approach. The unique insights uncovered in this research are the deep-rooted syncretic nature of Kashmiri culture, where the traditions of Shaivism and Sufism coexisted and influenced each other, giving rise to spiritual figures like Lal Ded and Nanda Rishi who embodied this synthesis. The present paper highlights the importance of historical and cultural context, while incorporating additional disciplinary perspectives from religious studies, sociology, anthropology, literary analysis, and material culture studies, can yield a richer, multifaceted analysis of the complex

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interactions between Kashmir Shaivism and Sufism during this transformative period.

Keywords
Shaivism, Sufism, Rishism, Lal Ded, Nuruddin, Syncretism

Introduction

From ancient times, Kashmir was a land of Hindu sages and Rishis. Various philosophical ideas or communities of Hinduism were widely practiced in Kashmir; one of them was Shaiva philosophy (Singh, 2005, p. 12). The philosophy of Kashmir Shaivism is deeply rooted in the Tantras, and its lineage begins with Shaiva traditions. According to tradition, during the Kali Yuga, Shiva took the form of Srikantanatha on Mount Kailash, where he fully initiated the sage Durvasa in all areas of Tantric knowledge, including Abheda (the concept of oneness), Vedaveda (knowledge both with and without distinctions), and Veda (knowledge that recognises differences) (Dyczkowski, 1987, pp. 45–47). These concepts are described in the Bhairava Tantra, Rudra Tantra, and Shiva Tantra, respectively. Durvasa's "mind-born" son, Tryambaka, focused on Bhairava Tantra and presented the Advaita Abheda philosophy in Hinduism. This initiation is regarded as the foundation of Kashmir Shaivism, where Shiva is the unchanging reality—the underlying fundamental level of the whole universe. He has infinite aspects of Shakti or power (Muller-Ortega, 1989, p. 63). In the 14th century, Kashmir's Lal Ded was a distinguished Shaiva saint whose poetic works, known as vaakhs, are considered the pillar of Kashmiri linguistics. Lal Ded's writings reflect the influence of both Hindu Shaivism and Sufism, as she was exposed to various spiritual perspectives throughout her life (Hassan, 2011, pp. 74–75). Her vaakhs explore the different levels of consciousness and unity within duality, representing a syncretic approach to spirituality.

The spread of Islamic influence in Kashmir can be traced back to the 10th century, when Turks, Persians, Arab traders, and Sufi missionaries began to enter the region (Rafiqi, 2003, p. 41). By the 14th century, this influence had intensified, particularly under the guidance of Sheikh Nur-ud-Din (Kashmiri Hindus known him as Nund Rishi or Sahajananda), who emerged as a central spiritual authority in the valley. Nur-ud-Din's teachings emphasised tolerance and the peaceful coexistence of diverse communities, thereby shaping the distinct ethos of Kashmiri Islam (Kaw, 2004, p. 116). During this period, Kashmiri Sufism developed along two broad currents: the orthodox Sufis, largely influenced by Persian

and Central Asian traditions, and the indigenous Rishi order, which cultivated a more inclusive and locally rooted spiritual approach (Rizvi, 1983, p. 289). The Rishis, inspired by the example of Nur-ud-Din, represented a unique Kashmiri form of mysticism that integrated elements from both Islam and pre-Islamic traditions (Lawrence, 2005, p. 152). A comprehensive understanding of Kashmiri Sufism, therefore, requires examining its intersections with both Shaivism and the indigenous sage tradition of the valley. In this context, two figures are especially significant: Lal Ded (Lalleshwari), the Shaivite mystic whose vaakhs articulated a simplified interpretation of Kashmir Shaivism, and Nund Rishi, whose poetry and teachings advanced a vision of spiritual egalitarianism. Together, these figures exemplify the syncretic foundations of Kashmiri spirituality. The present study adopts a multidisciplinary approach to understanding the complex interactions between Kashmir Shaivism and Sufism. However, implementing such a comprehensive analytical framework has to face some potential limitations and challenges.

Historical Context

Kashmir's history includes long periods of Hindu and Buddhist rule before Islam became prominent in the Valley. The spread of Islam in Kashmir was shaped less by conquest than by spiritual outreach through Sufi missionaries, who encouraged a syncretic religious culture (Kaw, 2004, pp. 15–16; Khan, 1994, pp. 23–24). The interaction between Shaivism and Sufism likely developed through peaceful coexistence and mutual influence. Kashmir Shaivism emphasizes that the entire cosmos is a manifestation of Śiva's consciousness—a monistic system in which the individual soul (jīva) and the universal (Śiva) are ultimately one (Singh, 1963, p. 37). Sufism, in its mystical dimensions, similarly stresses union with the Divine (fanāʾ), echoing non-dualistic perspectives of oneness of existence, love, devotion, and inner realization. Both traditions employ poetry and music as vehicles of spiritual expression. Lal Ded's vaakhs and Nund Rishi's shruks rely on metaphor and allegory to communicate teachings about impermanence, unity, and self-realization. Lal Ded's verses, in particular, embody the metaphysical insights of Kashmiri Shaivism while resonating with the mystical longings characteristic of Sufism (Parimoo, 1978, pp. 52–54).

After the decline of Hindu political authority around the 14th century, Sufi orders gained cultural prominence. Rather than erasing local traditions, they absorbed and reinterpreted them—

leading to a uniquely syncretic Kashmiri spirituality. Kashmir Shaivism's notion of pratyabhijñā (recognition) aligns with Sufism's concept of maʿrifa (gnosis)—both emphasize direct, inner knowledge of ultimate reality. Both traditions place primacy on the spiritual teacher or guru, and stress modalities such as meditation, *dhikr* (remembrance), and other inward practices over external ritual. The Rishi tradition that emerged—especially via Nund Rishi—embodies this blending. Nund Rishi is revered as a bridge between Shaiva and Sufi heritages, founding a local order that championed simplicity, non-violence, equality, and direct personal experience of the divine (Raina, 2014, p. 112). Likewise, the Rishis' fusion of Hindu mysticism with Sufi devotion cultivated communal harmony and spiritual unity.

While there's syncretism, there might have been tensions too—Orthodox practitioners from both sides sometimes opposed the blending of traditions, as seen in debates around samāʿ where jurists criticized musical devotion while Sufis defended it (Lewisohn, 1997, pp. 1–2). In Kashmir, however, the Rishi order of Sufis is known for tolerance and for integrating local customs; even Mughal chroniclers noted the special esteem in which the Rishis were held. The Qādiriyya (a transregional Sufi ṭarīqa) brought more conventional lodge-based dhikr lineages to the Valley, whereas the indigenous Rishis emphasised simplicity and accommodation to Kashmiri lifeways; the early spread of Sufism in Kashmir is linked to figures such as Bulbul Shah and to 14th-century political change under Shāh Mīr. Kashmir Śaivism centers on Śiva's dynamic power (Śakti)—the universe as the real manifestation of Śiva's energy (spanda)—a point made succinctly in Kṣemarāja's Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam (Singh, 1963, p. 37). Sufism's ideal of nearness or unity with God (through dhikr, fanāʾ/baqāʾ, and contemplative practice) can look analogous, though articulated firmly within an Islamic theological framework (Schimmel, 1975, pp. 164–166). In modern times, this shared Shaiva–Sufi heritage is still invoked as a cultural cornerstone of Kashmiriyat, and scholars and civic groups explicitly promote it as a model for intercommunal harmony. Lal Ded (14th c.) likely predated or overlapped the earliest Sufi missionaries; the 14th century also saw figures like Bulbul Shah and the foundation of Shah Mir dynasty, while the Rishi movement took clearer shape with Nund Rishi in the late 14th–early 15th century. In terms of practice, both streams use breath regulation, chanting, and meditation—the Sufis with habs-i dam (breath restraint), dhikr, and samāʿ, and the Śaiva side with mantra-japa and contemplative tantric ritual aimed at recognition of the Self—

overlapping in intention if different in form (Green, 2012, p. 88; Singh, 1963, p. 37).

Foundation of Shaivism

Kashmir was historically a cosmopolitan region that witnessed the intermingling of diverse cultural and religious traditions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism, even from the early centuries (Kaw, 2004, pp. 12–13). Worship of Śiva was widespread in Kashmir from an early period, with references to Śiva temples and shrines found in ancient sources such as Kalhaṇa's Rājataraṅgiṇī. Early Kashmiri Śaivism reflected the Pāśupata school, which emphasized a dualistic orientation (Chakravarti, 1986, pp. 78–79). From the 8th–9th centuries, however, the Śaiva system in Kashmir underwent a transformation and began advocating a form of idealistic monism, eventually known as Trika Śāstra (Pandey, 2008, p. 6). Trika Śaivism emerged as a response to the intellectual and religious conflicts of the period, with Vasugupta traditionally credited with the revelation of the Śiva Sūtras, which articulated the principles of non-dualistic idealism.

The Karkota and Utpala dynasties played a pivotal role in the development of Kashmiri Shaivism. Every associate of the Karkota family, particularly King Lalitaditya, was known for their devotion to Shiva. Lalitaditya is credited with constructing a monumental stone temple dedicated to Shiva Jyestharudra and granting land and villages for its maintenance (Stein, 1900, p. 145). The succeeding Utpala dynasty also extended patronage to Shaivism. Under King Avantivarman, his minister Sura commissioned a temple in honour of Shiva and his consort, reinforcing the tradition's royal support (Stein, 1900, p. 276).

The political expansion under Lalitaditya and the cultural consolidation during Avantivarman's reign in the 8th–9th centuries created a favourable environment for Shaivism to thrive in Kashmir (Sanderson, 2009, pp. 52–54). The tradition advanced further in the 10th–11th centuries through the work of the philosopher and polymath Abhinavagupta, who made seminal contributions to metaphysics, aesthetics, and Tantra (Raina, 2014, pp. 72–75). Earlier masters such as Somananda and Utpaladeva, along with Abhinavagupta, were instrumental in developing the Pratyabhijñā-Śāstra and Spanda-Śāstra, which together formed the foundation of the Trika system (Dyczkowski, 1987, pp. 34–39). Significantly, Kashmiri Shaivism distinguished itself through its inclusive orientation, welcoming aspirants regardless of caste, creed, or gender (Pandit, 1997, p. 21). Philosophically, it developed as a system of idealistic monism

grounded in the Śiva Sūtras, which outline the threefold principles of God, Soul, and Matter.

Abhinavagupta's Contribution

Abhinavagupta, one of the foremost thinkers of Kashmiri Shaivism, presents manifestation as the expression of universal consciousness appearing outwardly to the individual (Tantray et al., 2018, p. 1). He illustrates this with the image of waves rising from the ocean, conveying how the infinite consciousness unfolds into diverse forms. Similarly, he compares the world to reflections in a mirror: although trees, rivers, and villages seem separate from the mirror, they are inseparable from it. In the same way, the world, as reflected in universal consciousness, is not distinct from that consciousness. Manifestation, then, is the process by which universal consciousness appears as if external to the empirical observer (Abhinavagupta, trans. Singh, 1989, p. 121).

According to N. Rastogi, "Abhinavagupta has written on very scientific principles; it offers a most updated (of course, till his period), extremely comprehensive and truly systematic account of the tantric material and thereby offers a model for modern research" (Rastogi, 1987, p.ix). The devotees of this religion lectured on the Shivite legend in the neighbourhood's linguistics. In his announcement, Abhinavagupta concedes that the profound order of this faction remained exceptionally extreme. This can't be decided that this clique is more likely than not to be exceptionally well known among the regular masses of Kashmir. This is assumed that the mass prevalence is more likely than not, as respected Abhinavagupta put them in his book of 'Tantraloka'. Generally, Sanskrit researchers have by and large disregarded such intersection reference. In this Book, "he systematised the philosophy and religion of Tantra in a cogent and coherent way. The 'Tantraloka' is the most rational and logical presentation of the *Tantrik* position of existence" (Chitkara, 2002, p.26).

Philosophical and Metaphysical Foundations

The 'philosophy of Kashmir Shaivism is deeply rooted in the Tantras', indicating the importance of Tantric texts and concepts to this tradition. The present study outlines some of the key metaphysical principles of Kashmir Shaivism, such as Shiva as the 'unchanging reality' and the 'underlying fundamental level of the whole universe' with 'infinite aspects of Shakti or power' (Qazi, 2023, para. 1). It mentions that according to tradition, Shiva initiated the sage Durvasa in 'all areas of Tantric knowledge, including Abheda (the concept of oneness), Vedaveda (knowledge

both with and without distinctions), and Veda (knowledge that recognizes differences)' (Parabhairava.org, 2025, para. 1). These concepts are described as being presented in the Bhairava Tantra, Rudra Tantra, and Shiva Tantra, respectively. Shiva is seen as the 'unchanging reality' and the 'underlying fundamental level of the whole universe' within Kashmir Shaivism. Shiva is understood to have 'infinite aspects of Shakti or power', including Chit (intellect), Ananda (joy), Ichcha (will), Jnana (knowledge), and Kriya (creative power) (Qazi, 2023, para. 1). These interrelated concepts thus form the philosophical and metaphysical foundation for understanding the nature of the divine, the relationship between the absolute and the relative, and the various levels of spiritual consciousness within Kashmir Shaivism. In essence, Lal Ded's perspective on Islam and Sufism is one of harmonious integration, viewing them as valid, parallel paths to divine truth. Her work underscores the universality of mystical experience, where the essence of spirituality transcends religious boundaries, aligning closely with Sufi ideals of love, unity, and inner transformation.

Syncretic Influence and Shaivite Lal Ded

Lalla Yogeshwari, a distinguished feminine Shaiva saint of Kashmir, about whom hardly any work was stated in the academic world. The present-day canon of her poetry is also popularly known for her "expressions" or even vaakhs since they're famous in Kashmir. Her literature is most imputed to delivering the cornerstone of the Kashmiri language. Although Lalla's spiritual journey was rooted in Kashmiri Shaivism, her thought was shaped by exposure to diverse perspectives on faith, spirituality, and God throughout her life (Parimoo, 1987, pp. 45–46). Her work cannot be confined solely to Hindu Shaivism or Sufism; rather, it reflects an engagement with Islamic teachings and Semitic traditions as well. Lalla's vaakhs illustrate her progression from an understanding of the absolute toward broader spiritual insights. She tries to convey the many different heights of consciousness of their unity within duality--that the understanding of this world. Lalla clarifies that the course of action by which slow mental alteration of this procedure for reflection does occur, as you meditate around the origin of every one of those fundamentals. According to Roberts (1995), this transpires when an individual overcomes the constraining power of maya, which entangles consciousness in the realm of names and forms (p. 34). Such a relation is additionally clarified further by the Sufis, for example, Hamadani, along with Nooruddin

Nurani. Although Lalla's spiritual journey originated within the framework of Kashmiri Shaivism, her ideas were profoundly shaped by engagement with diverse perspectives on faith, spirituality, and the nature of the divine throughout her life (Parimoo, 1987, pp. 45–46). Consequently, her work cannot be understood solely within the boundaries of Hindu Shaivism or Sufism; it also reflects the influence of Islamic teachings and Semitic traditions. Lalla's vaakhs reveal her progression from an initial comprehension of the absolute toward broader spiritual insights. In this context, her vaakhs systematically integrate core principles and practices for realizing ultimate truth, effectively synthesising Shaivite and Sufi concepts—a testament to the syncretic spiritual culture that characterised fourteenth-century Kashmir.

The arrival of Sufis from Persia and Central Asia in Kashmir coincided with the emergence of a distinct Sufi adaptation known as the Rishi order, which promoted the peaceful coexistence of all people. This development led to two broad currents of Sufism in the region: migrant Sufis, who generally adhered to orthodox practices from Persia and Central Asia, and native Rishis, who embraced a more inclusive system of coexistence (Dar, 2004, pp. 115–116). The Rishis drew their inspiration primarily from popular devotion, emphasising love for humanity rather than engaging in formal Islamic missionary work, such as establishing madrasas, and maintaining a distance from political authorities. Intentionally or not, they cultivated ethical principles comparable to the refined spiritual ideals associated with Rumi, incorporating practices such as bodily discipline and rigorous asceticism similar to those of the Yogis. The Rishis did not pledge allegiance to any specific Sufi master and were receptive to the teachings and practices of Hindu ascetics, particularly the Shaivites of Kashmir.

It is noteworthy that Lal Ded requires earnest and careful scholarly attention. Her Kashmiri sayings must first be philologically evaluated to grasp the authentic meaning of her teachings. While her exact role in shaping spiritually motivated Sufi thought remains debated, her poems (vaakhs) reflect an amalgam of mystical Shaivism and Sufism, resonating deeply with the masses, who revered her as Lalla Arifa among Muslims and Lalleshwari among Hindus (Kak, 2017, p. 42; Kaul, 2020, p. 118). Her spirituality, accessible to common people uder the rule of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin, reflected a move towards yogic practices interpreted through a syncretic lens (Toshkhani, 2014, p. 67).

Kashmir Shaivism itself is rooted in Tantric traditions and the teachings of figures such as Srikantanatha and Lal Ded, whose

spiritual journey embodied both Shaiva and Sufi influences. Her poetry captures this synthesis of traditions, bridging the mystical philosophies of both faiths (Bazaz, 2011, p. 211). By the 14th century, the growing influence of Islam through Persian, Turkish, and Arab interactions accelerated religious transformations, leading to the conversion of many Kashmiri Hindus. The Rishi order, founded by Nanda Rishi and further developed by Nur-ud-Din, emphasized peaceful coexistence and incorporated both Shaiva and Islamic elements (Shafi, 2016, p. 89). Through their emphasis on simplicity, devotion, and unity, the Rishis helped spread Islam in Kashmir while preserving local traditions, a process exemplified by the teachings of Lal Ded and Nanda Rishi (Raina, 2019, p. 154). This synthesis gave rise to Kashmiriyat, the shared cultural ethos of Kashmir built on Shaiva–Sufi syncretism (Dar, 2021, p. 233).

Nur-ud-Din a Sufi Rishi

Nanda Rishi, known for his humanitarian outlook and absence of malice, has often been incorrectly depicted as an eager proselytizer seeking to convert Bhoma Rishi to Islam. In truth, he was a celibate vegetarian who dedicated much of his life to meditation and spiritual development, embodying ethical and spiritual principles shared by Buddhists, Shaivites, and other contemporary traditions. His unwillingness to accept the religious or spiritual authority claimed by the Sayyids, particularly Mir Mohammad Hamdani, led to their opposition. Drawing upon Kashmir's ancient spiritual heritage, the indigenous sage movement emphasized the cultivation of higher spiritual and humanistic values, creating a mindset that influenced many Kashmiris toward Islam. Through this movement, the valley experienced a significant cultural and spiritual revitalisation. Within this framework, the contributions of Nur-ud-Din to the spread of Islam in Kashmir are regarded as more influential than those of Sayyid Ali Hamadani, as Islam was introduced through a Sufi movement that continues to maintain its distinctive character in the region (Para et al., 2022, pp. 5–6; Khan, 1986, p. 122).

The Rishi order of Sufism stands as the most significant influence on the Kashmiris' sense of Kashmiriyat. Nur-ud-Din, also known as Nund Rishi, founded the Islamic Rishi order in Kashmir. Rather than imparting formal Islamic teachings, he, as a Sufi Rishi, disseminated a message of universal brotherhood through his poetry (shrakh), which resonated even with the illiterate populace of Kashmir (Odin, 2013, p. 17). The Rishi tradition in Kashmir boasts a rich history, tracing back to pre-Vedic times, and

continues to be revered by all Kashmiris—Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, and others (Para et al., 2022, p. 7). Understanding Kashmiri Islamic Rishism necessitates considering both Sufism and the pre-Islamic Rishi tradition of Kashmir, as thousands of Rishis have profoundly influenced local culture. This study endeavours to critically examine the origins of the Rishi order in Kashmir and the role of Nanda Rishi in the spread of Islam throughout the valley.

Wider Significance of Syncretic Society

Sufism was significantly influenced by Shaivism, and they practised Yoga. Many Sufis regarded Hindu yogis as allies and fellow practitioners. They often viewed them as experts from whom they could learn practical and effective mysticism techniques. These techniques could help practitioners, whether yogis or Sufis, draw closer to God or achieve various esoteric goals (Ernst, 2019, para. 2). Nur-ud-Din, who was motivated by Lal Ded's Shaiva philosophy, preached his message not only the principles of the Islamic faith but also spreading non-religious spiritual messages for the people of Kashmir. The Sufis, after Nur-ud-Din, also preached the same syncretic messages to everyone in the Valley (Para et al., 2022, pp. 5–6). It can be said that Shaivism and Sufism not only moulded the history and the traditional culture of Kashmir but also contributed remarkably to the evolution and development of the composite culture of India. The interaction between Kashmir Shaivism and Sufism extends beyond a purely academic discussion, representing a profound dialogue that fosters both cultural and spiritual cohesion. This exchange has historically bridged diverse communities, allowing for a synthesis of philosophical and ethical perspectives that enrich the collective consciousness of Kashmir. Such a dialogue also facilitates a deeper understanding of shared heritage, particularly the concept of Kashmiriyat, which emphasizes tolerance, coexistence, and mutual respect among different religious and spiritual traditions (Dar, 2004; Parimoo, 1987). By highlighting common ethical principles and spiritual practices, the convergence of Shaivite and Sufi thought underscores the region's unique syncretic identity and its enduring commitment to social harmony. The Valley of Kashmir has made an enduring contribution to Indian philosophy, thought, historiography, and cultural expressions, becoming a vital part of India's process of transculturation. Historically, this transcultural exchange was not limited to Kashmir but extended to various regions of India, where traditions of Shaivism, Sufism, and Rishism stimulated intellectual, spiritual, and social

development (Raina, 2019, p. 45; Bazaz, 2011, p. 122). The people, socio-cultural organisation, language, literature, festivals, and everyday practices in Kashmir reflect this syncretic ethos, which calls for revitalisation to preserve its unique identity (Dar, 2021, p. 88). Social variables such as acculturation, assimilation, and diffusion influenced both Hindus and Muslims, shaping their religious beliefs, customs, and traditions (Shafi, 2016, p. 77). Thus, Kashmir Shaivism and Sufism together offer profound insights into existence and spirituality, while also fostering a shared cultural foundation (Toshkhani, 2014, p. 63).

Comparison with other Philosophies

The manifestation process in Kashmir Shaivism is compared to the concepts of 'Nature Naturans' and 'Nature Naturata' in Spinoza's philosophy, as well as the 'matter' and 'form' concepts in Aristotle's philosophy (Tantray et al., 2018, p. 1). The Kashmiri Sufi poetic tradition, stemming from the synthesis of Shaivism and Sufism, has continued to evolve and be enriched by later poets who have drawn upon both the indigenous and imported elements of this tradition. Nund Rishi, while being influenced by Lal-Ded's spiritual tradition, synthesised Shaivism with Islamic concepts and practices, creating a unique Sufi poetry that celebrates the oneness of being and the attainment of divine union through self-recognition (Shafi, 2016, p. 80). The continuity and evolution of this Kashmiri Sufi poetic tradition through the works of various poets from the 18th to the 20th century highlights how they have broadened, deepened, and enriched the tradition through their own spiritual experiences and creative expressions.

Lal Ded's view about Islam and Sufism

Lal Ded was a 14th-century mystic poet from Kashmir. Her poetry is in Kashmiri, and both Hindus and Muslims revere her. Her teachings probably transcend religious boundaries. But the user specifically wants to know about her views on Islam and Sufism. Kashmir during her time was a place where Hinduism and Islam coexisted, and Sufi traditions were influential. Sufism is the mystical branch of Islam, emphasising a personal connection with the divine. Lal Ded is often associated with the Kashmiri Shaivite tradition, which is a form of Hinduism focused on Shiva. However, her appeal across religions suggests she might have incorporated elements from both traditions (Hassnain, 2015, p. 66). Her poetry, called vakhs, often uses metaphors and allegories; some of her verses talk about the impermanence of the physical world and the importance of inner realisation. But how does that relate to Islam

and Sufism? Sufis also emphasise inner spirituality over ritual, seeking union with the divine, which is similar to some Hindu mystical traditions. Maybe Lal Ded's teachings resonated with Sufi ideas because of this overlap in mysticism (Dar, 2021, p. 93).

An important question for researchers is whether Lal Ded was a Muslim or not. According to the information available, Lal Ded was born into a Hindu family, while some sources indicate that she had close contact with Sufi saints. The story of her interaction with the famous Sufi saint Syed Ali Hamadani is found in the works of many authors. Although there is a lack of reliable information about it (Bazaz, 1959, pp. 118–119). In this regard, the folklore prevalent in Kashmir provides some information. There is a famous story of Lal Ded's meeting with Sheikh Nuruddin Noorani, who was a Sufi Rishi. Their conversation is marked as a symbol of Kashmiri syncretism. Although Lal Ded was rooted in Shaivism, her teachings influenced or harmonised the Kashmiri Sufi sage's thought. Like the Sufi saints, Lal Ded emphasised the impermanence of the physical world and the importance of spiritual discipline for attaining divine union (Wani, 2009, pp. 142–143).

In her poetry, she criticises empty rituals and emphasises direct experience of the divine. That's a common theme in both Sufism and Bhakti movements. So maybe her view on Islam, or at least Sufism, is that the outer forms of religion are less important than the inner spiritual quest. She might have seen Sufism as a path similar to her own Kashmiri Shaivism, both aiming for union with the divine beyond doctrinal differences. It is not that he explicitly preached Islam or converted to Islam just because his teachings were accepted by both communities (Bazaz, 1959, pp. 118–120; Kaw, 2004, p. 67). Rather, his focus was on the universal aspects of spirituality. Also, considering the political and social context of her time, Kashmir was undergoing Islamic influence, so her ability to transcend religious labels might have been a way to bridge communities. But her primary framework was still Shaivism. However, the syncretic culture of Kashmir allowed her vaakhs to be embraced by Muslims, especially Sufis, who found common ground in the mystical experience.

Lal Ded, the 14th-century Kashmiri mystic poet, is celebrated for transcending religious boundaries, with her teachings resonating deeply within both Hindu and Islamic traditions, particularly Sufism. Her views on Islam and Sufism can be understood through the following points:

1. **Syncretic Spirituality**: Lal Ded’s poetry (vaakhs) emphasizes universal spiritual truths over sectarian dogma.

While rooted in Kashmiri Shaivism, her teachings align with Sufi mysticism in their focus on inner realization, divine unity, and transcending ritualistic formalism. She critiques empty rituals, advocating instead for direct, personal experience of the divine—a theme central to both Sufism and Bhakti traditions (Parimoo, 1978, p. 112).

2. **Influence of Sufi Thought:** Although born into a Hindu Brahmin family, Lal Ded's engagement with Sufi saints, such as Sayyid Ali Hamadani and Sheikh Noor-ud-Din Noorani, reflects Kashmir's syncretic culture. Her verses frequently echo Sufi ideas like fana (the annihilation of the ego) and the quest for divine love (ishq), indicating a shared mystical ethos despite differing theological frameworks (Rizvi, 1983, p. 215).
3. **Unity of Divine Experience**: Lal Ded's view posits that all genuine spiritual paths, including Islam (via Sufism), lead to the same ultimate truth. Her famous vakh, "Shiva is everywhere, know Him as the sun. Know not the Pandit different to the Muslim..." underscores this inclusivity, mirroring the Sufi belief in waḥdat al-wujūd (unity of existence) (Bamzai, 1994, p. 236). She saw external religious labels as secondary to the inner quest for oneness with the divine.

Lal Ded's rejection of rigid orthodoxy in favour of heartfelt devotion resonates with Sufism's emphasis on inner purity over outward observance. This stance allowed her poetry to bridge Hindu and Muslim communities, fostering a shared spiritual heritage in Kashmir. Lal Ded's enduring appeal among both Hindus and Muslims illustrates her role as a unifying figure. Her teachings exemplify the Kashmiriyat tradition—a cultural identity emphasising coexistence—and highlight the compatibility of mystical experiences across religions. Considering the spatial, architectural and material dimensions of fourteenth-century Kashmir – such as shared sacred sites, religious sites and material culture associated with Shaivism and Sufism – can complement the textual analysis and provide a more holistic understanding of their synergetic relationships (Aslam, 2020).

Conclusion

The paper suggests that the spiritual and cultural traditions represented by Lal-Ded and Nund Rishi remain highly relevant and influential in contemporary Kashmiri poetry, encompassing both Sufi and Shaivism. Their works and

teachings are seen as a living, vibrant tradition that shapes the shared spiritual and cultural consciousness of Kashmiris. Kashmir is a site of cultural and spiritual confluence, where the indigenous Shaivite tradition and the Sufi tradition that gained popularity in the region have been synthesised and assimilated. This synthesis is embodied in the works and spiritual experiences of key figures like Lal-Ded and Nund Rishi. The paper highlights how Kashmiri culture has been a site of synthesis between the indigenous Shaivite tradition and the imported Sufi tradition that gained popularity in the region. Key figures like Lal-Ded and Nund Rishi are presented as embodying this synthesis, blending concepts and themes from both traditions in their poetry and spiritual experiences. Shiva represents the 'form' or 'light' aspect of reality, while Shakti represents the 'matter' or 'activity' aspect. The manifestation occurs through the union of Shiva and Shakti, where Shiva represents potential energy, while Shakti embodies its dynamic expression.

Lal Ded's poems (vaakhs) were an amalgam of mystical Saivism and Sufism, which resonated with the common people. Nanda Rishi, a celibate and vegetarian, was a real humanist. The indigenous Rishi movement, rooted in Kashmir's spiritual heritage, prepared a mindset that was responsible for the spread of Islam in Kashmir through a Sufi-Rishi movement distinct from the efforts of Sayyids. The major findings of this study satisfy the aim of examining the syncretic culture in Kashmir, particularly the influence of Shaivism and Sufism, as represented through the conceptions of Lal Ded and Nanda Rishi. Lalla's vaakhs reflect her shifting from the absolute to the relative level of understanding, conveying the different heights of consciousness of unity within duality. Lalla's vaakhs consolidated the fundamental competencies and process of understanding of the ultimate reality in a way that integrates Kashmiri Shaivism and Sufism, as seen in the 14th-century syncretic culture of Kashmir.

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Review Article

PROFUSION OF INFORMATION: GROWING CONCERNS AND INFORMATION LITERACY AS AN AMPLIFIED TOOL TO OVERCOME ITS ANXIETIES

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Abstract
The present study explores the complex issue of information excess, a growing challenge in today's data-driven society where the vast volumes of information often hinders users from finding reliable and relevant sources. The research tries to examine the causes of this data and information excess, including cognitive limitations and rapid digital content growth, which leads to decreased productivity and increased stress. By investigating the ways to address these issues through information literacy, this study aims to highlight strategies that improve users' skills in evaluating and managing the information. Emphasizing libraries evolving role, it explores structured programs and AI tools that help users access and utilize information more effectively amidst abundant data. It uses the appraisal of the existing stock of literature through academic databases such as EmeraldInsight, ScienceDirect, J-Gate, etc. to find the relevant content. It included the analysis of the studies focusing on information overload, information literacy, and the role of libraries in promoting information literacy. It examined the effects and consequences of information overload on users and highlights the relevant strategies and tools used to mitigate these challenges. The study finds that both personal cognitive limitations and the exponential increase in available information significantly contribute to information overload. This issue in turn leads to reduced

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productivity, poor decision-making, and increased stress. Programs offered by libraries, along with advanced technological tools like AI chat bots, plays vital role in enhancing information literacy. These resources help users develop skills in evaluation, critical analysis, and effective retrieval strategies, thus enabling them to manage and utilize information more efficiently. This study highlights the importance of library led information literacy programs in addressing information overload, offering a unique perspective on integrating AI tools, such as Google Bard, within library services to enhance user support through real-time, and interactive guidance. By presenting a list of tools and programs, this paper provides valuable insights into current practices that empower users to identify and access reliable information in an age of data abundance and misinformation.

Keywords
Information overload, Cognitive limitations, Artificial intelligence Chatbots, Google bard. Information Literacy

1. Introduction

The 21st century is represented with plenty of free flow of information from numerous sources available both in print and electronic formats. This information is accessible through different sources like libraries, community centers, service providers, media and internet thus helping in providing an ease of access to avail this information (Bundy, 2004). Also, in today's rapidly evolving world, digital technologies have transformed the way we interact with information, making it one of the most valuable resources for personal, professional, and societal progress. The integration of the internet, mobile devices, and digital platforms has led to unprecedented connectivity, enhancing access to education, real-time communication, and global collaboration. However, this transformation in information access also presents challenges. The constant flow of data from diverse sources like traditional media, social media, blogs, and many more other sources of information exposes individuals to overwhelming amounts of information daily. While these information sources empower people with knowledge by providing access to information at fingertips, they complicate the ability to discern useful and relevant bits of data. As a result, volume of information continues to rise and the issue of information abundance becomes critical, raising questions about our capacity to process and utilize the available content meaningfully and eventually leading to the problem of information overload. Also the void between the

plethora of information available and skill set of information users has required them to attain some level of information and technological skill sets to help them in becoming the effective information users, and setting apart from information overload (Ferguson, 2009). The phrase information overload is attributed to the American social scientist Bertram Gross (1964), who used it to refer to the state when the information inputs to any system exceed its information processing capabilities. Although this term has been the most commonly used, the phenomenon has been referred to by other names like information overabundance, infobesity, infoglut, data smog, information pollution, information fatigue, social media fatigue, social media overload, information anxiety, library anxiety, infostress, infoxication, reading overload, communication overload, cognitive overload, and more (Bawden & Robinson, 2020). As the former Google executive chairman Eric Schmidt stated that "the amount of information being created every two days is equivalent to that created from the dawn of civilization until the year 2003" With such a vast amount of information produced on daily basis we are suffering from the problem of information overload (Kumaim et al., 2021a). Personal factors are key contributors to information overload, forming the main context in which it arises. Limitations in areas like cognitive, psychodynamic, and behavioral factors, as well as demographic characteristics, intensify the impact of external factors, making individuals more vulnerable to information overload (Shahrzadi et al., 2024a). A major technological factor in information overload is the rapid online expansion of academic information, driven by fast, automated production and distribution of scientific articles made possible by advances in internet technology. Additionally, having multiple sources of information contributes to this overload. Many individuals also lack the skills to effectively use keywords, keyterms, and tools for managing and filtering information, which exacerbates the issue. By using traditional searching methods and not relying on Boolean operators in their searches adds up in information overload (Kumaim et al., 2021a). For individuals with access to computers, the internet, email, and other resources, additional causes of information overload include the ease of data creation, duplication, and transmission across the internet, which expands the channels for incoming information. Combined with the absence of a method to compare and process diverse types of information, these factors further contribute to the problem of information overload (Kashada et al., 2020). Research on the 'problem of information overload' has highlighted various effects on individuals and organizations, such as reduced work

quality, mental and psychological challenges, and heightened stress due to limited information processing capacity. It also negatively affects employee productivity, decision-making quality, and stress levels. Furthermore, considerable time is often spent searching for, sorting, and processing information (Mungly et al., 2012). "Information anxiety, refers to a condition of stress resulting from the inability to access, comprehend, or effectively use essential information. This anxiety may stem from either information overload or lack of information, as well as from poorly organized or presented data, or a limited understanding of one's information environment. A related concept, "library anxiety," was identified in 1986 and has since been further studied. This type of anxiety manifests as a sense of helplessness when starting a library search, often accompanied by feelings of being lost, struggling to navigate, and hesitating to ask library staff for help (Bawden & Robinson, 2009). Exploring the effects of information overload provides valuable insights into its broad implications. First, limited strategies for information search and retrieval prevent individuals from effectively accessing and utilizing the wealth of information available. This restriction not only hampers their decision-making but also limits opportunities for personal and professional development. Additionally, information overload negatively affects both individual and organizational performance, as the constant influx of information can overwhelm individuals, reducing productivity, raising stress levels, and lowering job satisfaction. As a result, organizations experience lower efficiency, reduced innovation, and an overall decline in performance (Shahrzadi et al., 2024b). Users experiencing information overload described feelings of stress, discouragement, disappointment, and confusion. Words such as "stressed," "frustrated," "confused," and "sleepless" were frequently mentioned (Kumaim et al., 2021b).

2. Objectives of the Study

The study outlines the concerns of the Information Overload and the inability of the users to find and search relevant portions of the information for effective use. It also explores how information literacy is useful in different ways for managing the information explosion. The following objectives have been compiled:

- To develop critical thinking and evaluation skills through information literacy for analyzing and identifying misinformation and disinformation.
- To integrate information literacy programs in curriculum to equip learners with skill sets for effective information

retrieval and information management therefore curbing information overload.
- To enhance use of AI tools for proper searching strategy, keyword identification and refinement of useless information.
- To apply information literacy skills to overcome information overload, improve retention and recall, and reduce mental strain caused by excessive information.

3. Literature Review

In an era where digital information access and privacy are paramount, understanding the interplay between information literacy and information rights has become essential. Eltemasi (2024) conducted a study to explore the relationship between information literacy and information rights, specifically examining how individuals with high information literacy recognize and apply these rights. A mixed-method approach was adopted. Quantitative data from Master's and PhD students were gathered through pre- and post-course surveys after a two-month online information literacy program, analyzed using t-tests. The study found that education and experience significantly enhance individuals' understanding and strategic use of information rights. Participants showed increased awareness of online privacy, intellectual property, and ethical information use. As health misinformation spreads on social media, information literacy emerges as a crucial tool in combating it. Using the elaboration likelihood model (ELM), Sun and Dong (2024) examined in what way factors like information literacy, issue involvement, and active social media use affect users' ability to recognize and correct health misinformation, grounded in the elaboration likelihood model (ELM). Survey method was used for data collection, it was found both that issue involvement and information literacy contributes to the intention to correct health misinformation (HMCI), with misinformation recognition mediating the relationship between information literacy and HMCI. Because information literacy is understood differently across various educational settings, it is becoming more important to understand its multiple dimensions. Bruce (1998) conducted a study to examine varying conceptions of information literacy amongst a group of lecturers, librarians, staff developers and learning counsellors. A phenomenographic approach was used to discover their conceptions. Data were gathered from participants, both male and female, through interviews, e-mail discussions and workshops. As an outcome of the analysis, seven categories, or

"faces" of information literacy were discovered. Addressing the ongoing need for information literacy and equitable access to knowledge, recent studies underscore the importance of bridging digital divides and enhancing library instruction. Caffrey et al. (2023) conducted a study to present recently published resources on library instruction and information literacy. This study presents an overview and an annotated bibliography of English-language publications on library instruction and information literacy from 2022, encompassing articles, dissertations, theses, and reports from many sources. The analysis underscores key issues such as information literacy needs, digital divides, and the role of information behavior in enhancing literacy education and access to information resources. Amid growing societal disparities and the digital divide, understanding information behavior has become essential for advancing information literacy and enhancing access to electronic resources. Bothma and Fourie (2024) explored the way enhancing information literacy could reduce social disparities and bridge digital divides by promoting the effective use of electronic resources such as e-dictionaries. Through a scoping review of literature on information literacy, behavior, and lexicography, it introduced the concept of dictionary literacy as a complementary research area. The findings highlighted the importance of integrating dictionary use and lexicographic perspectives into information literacy studies to improve digital learning, information access, and interdisciplinary understanding. As information literacy (IL) becomes increasingly vital for academic success, its role in enhancing students' research skills is gaining attention. Alahi and Yesmin (2024) examined the impact of information literacy (IL) on students' research competency at Noakhali Science and Technology University (NSTU), Bangladesh, using a mixed-method approach. For the quantitative data collection, research-level students (honors final year and master's level) were surveyed, with approximately 225 respondents selected through convenience sampling. The results revealed that students are aware of various aspects of information and research literacy. They also study found a positive correlation between students' information literacy and their research competency.

4. Research Methodology

The present study focuses on understanding the way information literacy can help people to manage the growing problem of information overload in today's digital world. In this study, literature review was conducted on existing stock of knowledge via

academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, Emerald Insight, and J- Gate.
The following search terms were used to identify relevant research articles:
Information Literacy, Information Overload, AI and Information Literacy, Misinformation and Disinformation, Information Abundance, Data Excess, Information Explosion.
These search terms helped locate articles focusing on information literacy and exploring ways to manage the problem of information overload. Only peer-reviewed research articles were included in the present study to ensure that the selected papers specifically addressed concerns caused by information overload. After collecting the literature from various sources, the research papers were analyzed through thematic analysis. Each research paper was carefully reviewed to identify relevant and practical strategies for overcoming the concerns caused of information overload.

5. Analysis of the Studies consulted

The present study has analysed 35 research papers dealing with different aspects of Information excess and the challenges it poses to academicians and researchers. The studies were divided into different themes based on the objectives of the present study and the variables taken. It was broadly then curated into relevant areas related with the problems of Information and data abundance followed by the remedial measures provided by the Information Literacy programs especially the new tools offered by the Artificial Intelligence. The following sections will be reflected in these aspects of the study:

6. Major Concerns and their remedies by Information Literacy

In today's information-rich world, developing strong information literacy skills are essential for navigating and understanding complex sources. Information literacy enables individuals to critically assess the credibility of information, make informed decisions, and effectively manage information overload. Libraries play a crucial role in promoting these skills, offering educational programs and advanced tools like AI chatbots to help users refine search strategies, evaluate sources, and engage meaningfully with information.

6.1 Information literacy as a tool to stop misinformation and disinformation: The vast availability of information sources has led to an increase in both misinformation and disinformation. Misinformation is false or inaccurate information shared without

harmful intent, while disinformation is the intentional spread of false information meant to deceive. Librarians, with their expertise in information literacy, are particularly well-equipped to distinguish between the two, information literacy enables librarians to critically assess sources, determine the reliability of information, and teach others these vital skills. As educators, librarians play a vital role in helping individuals navigate the complex world of information, fostering a society that can effectively distinguish between accurate and deceptive content. Their educational efforts are typically carried out through a variety of promotional campaigns, library orientations, and classroom instructions (Adewojo et al., 2024).Thus playing the pivotal role in spread of flawed information in a time when misinformation and disinformation are spreading very abruptly.

6.2 Information literacy part and parcel of curriculum to fight information overload

The Danish Electronic Research Library (DEF), a collaborative initiative involving 38 research libraries and the Danish National Library, plays a key role in promoting information literacy skills. It begins with a general introductory session lasting 1 to 2 hours, followed by various courses. These include general information retrieval courses ranging from 2 to 5 hours, advanced courses focused on either general topics or tailored for more advanced students and researchers, specialized courses in information retrieval for specific faculties or fields of study, and ad hoc courses on particular databases or information retrieval tools requested by students or university bodies. At institutions such as the Royal Veterinary and Agricultural University, Denmark's Pharmaceutical University, the University of Southern Denmark, and the Technical University of Denmark, courses in information searching are now integral to credit-bearing compulsory subjects, playing a crucial role in equipping students with information retrieval strategies and ultimately helping to alleviate information overload (Skov & Skaerbak, 2003).

6.3 Role of libraries in incorporation of AI Chat bots in providing effective search strategies and refinement of results: By incorporating AI chatbots like Google Bard, libraries play a crucial role in delivering timely access to information. This technological innovation allows libraries to provide users with dynamic, immediate support, seamlessly combining AI-generated insights with the expertise of librarians. The integration of Google Bard into library services has the potential to revolutionize the

development of information literacy. Bard's exceptional ability to understand and respond to natural language queries aligns with the conversational and interactive nature of modern internet interactions. As an active partner in creating effective search strategies, Bard engages users in meaningful conversations, helping them refine their searches to yield accurate and relevant results. Google Bard also acts as a virtual mentor, teaching users optimal methods for source evaluation, credibility assessment, and information synthesis from diverse perspectives. Through real-time responses, Bard demonstrates the ability to critically analyze users' queries and guide them in distinguishing trustworthy information while identifying potential biases **(**Adetayo, 2023). Similarly ChatGPT is highly capable in providing the relevant keywords regarding any topic thus play pivotal role in searching the relevant information.

6.4 Information Literacy as a tool to overcome Attention Deficit trait (ADT): Attention deficit trait another problem caused by information explosion, in this problem person thinks about the past and future without adequate attention to the present. ADT now epidemic in organizations which results in various problem like distractibility, inner frenzy, and impatience. By imparting information literacy skills organizations and individuals will be able to get rid of ADT.

6.5 Developing critical skills with the help of information literacy to fight with the problem of poor retention and recall: Information literacy enhances retention and recall by teaching effective strategies to organize and synthesize information. It helps individuals identify credible and relevant data, reducing cognitive overload and making learning more focused. Techniques like summarization, note-taking, and concept mapping are integral to information literacy, improving memory retention. Evaluating and reprocessing information fosters deeper understanding, making recall easier. By practicing these skills, individuals can retain knowledge more effectively and retrieve it when needed.

6.6 Information literacy as remedy to mental issues caused by information overload: Information overload can lead to mental health issues such as stress, anxiety, burnout, and decreased focus, as the constant barrage of information overwhelms the brain's capacity to process and prioritize. It can also cause irritability, decision fatigue, and impaired cognitive performance. Information literacy helps combat these issues by teaching

individuals to filter and prioritize essential information, reducing unnecessary input. It encourages the use of structured frameworks, like time management and critical evaluation, to handle data efficiently. This not only minimizes stress but also fosters a clearer, more focused mental state, improving overall mental well-being.

6.7 Information literacy cure for the problem of infobesity: Infobesity describes the detrimental effects of consuming too much information, akin to the damage caused by overeating unhealthy food. It is associated with information overload and can be managed by limiting intake to well-chosen, high-quality information in moderation, information literacy is helpful in critically analyzing and interpreting the information sources and results in choosing only right sources of information which is cure from the problem of infobesity.

7. Findings

Information literacy helps to recognize and challenge misinformation and disinformation. It gives users the ability to think critically, question what they read, and verify the accuracy of information. Through workshops, orientations, and awareness campaigns, libraries help people build confidence in identifying trustworthy sources and rejecting false or misleading content. Also incorporating information literacy in educational programs has proven highly effective in reducing information overload. When students learn different ways to search, organize, and evaluate information they become more independent, efficient, and capable researchers. Also Libraries are evolving with technology by using AI tools like Google Bard and ChatGPT. These intelligent assistants make it easier for users to find exactly what they're looking for, refine their searches, and eliminate unnecessary or irrelevant information. By acting as conversational mentors, AI tools also help users think more critically about the credibility and value of what they find online. Information literacy supports mental clarity, focus, and overall well-being in an age of information overload. It helps to overcome problems like distraction, stress, and mental fatigue by teaching them different ways to hold their attention and filter what truly matters. Developing these skills improves memory and understanding, making it easier to retain important knowledge. Moreover, by encouraging selective and mindful information consumption, information literacy protects individuals from "infobesity" the overwhelming habit of consuming too much information.

7. Conclusion

The information literacy (IL) is not just an academic skill but a vital life skill for navigating today's fast-paced, information-saturated world. In an era where people are constantly exposed to data, opinions, and content from multiple sources, the ability to think critically and evaluate information has become more important than ever. The key concerns caused by information abundance include the spread of misinformation and disinformation, information anxiety increasing information overload, and the growing issue of infobesity. Other major concerns are attention deficit trait (ADT) caused by constant digital distractions, poor retention and recall of information, and mental health problems such as stress and anxiety resulting from excessive information exposure. These challenges collectively highlight the need for stronger information literacy education and awareness. Information literacy empowers individuals to question what they read, recognize misinformation and disinformation, and make informed, evidence-based decisions. In this digital landscape overflowing with information, IL acts as a compass that guides learners toward accuracy and reliability. It helps them develop the confidence to distinguish between what is useful and what is misleading or irrelevant. When integrated into the educational curriculum, information literacy strengthens students' capacity to search strategically, organize data meaningfully, and manage vast information resources with efficiency. This integration reduces the effects of information overload, which often leads to confusion, stress, and cognitive fatigue among students and professionals alike. Moreover, the use of artificial intelligence tools such as ChatGPT and Google Bard enhances the application of information literacy by supporting smarter search strategies, keyword refinement, and credibility checks. These tools, when used responsibly, become valuable partners in learning, research, and problem-solving. Beyond academic achievement, information literacy also promotes mental well-being**.** By encouraging thoughtful, mindful, and selective engagement with information, individuals experience greater focus, improved retention and recall, and reduced stress caused by the constant influx of data. Ultimately, fostering information literacy across all levels of education and society contributes to building a community that is informed, balanced, and resilient. It nurtures citizens who are not only capable of managing information but also of using it ethically and intelligently to make positive contributions in a rapidly changing digital world.

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Review Article

WHO CARES? *UBUNTU*, CARE ETHICS, AND WOMEN'S WORK IN SOUTH AFRICA: A NON-WESTERN REIMAGINATION OF THE MODERN STATE

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Abhiruchi Ojha*

Abstract
Modern states are underpinned by a Hobbesian rationality which conceptualizes states as predominantly security actors. Feminists have long critiqued this as a masculine construct which is detrimental to the concerns of women as well as society in general. In this context, this paper explores the nature of the South African state through an examination of the experiences of South African women in the country's gendered labour market. The apartheid state normalized gender norms about women's work and these persist even though the subsequent liberal democratic South African regime has undertaken efforts to increase gender equality in all spheres of the society. Through an extensive data analysis, the article argues that there is gender pay gap, gender disparity in labour participation rates, among several other issues. Women's care work is not even counted as work. The article calls for a reinvention of the idea of state using principles from feminist care ethics and 'ubuntu' to make the state 'caring' and argues for seeing care as a political and public good, at both national and global level.

Keywords
Care Ethics, *ubuntu*, South Africa, Women's Work, Non-western International Relations

Introduction

Modern states have been conceptualized predominantly as security actors (Bhattacharya 2016), and this is largely due to the

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Eurocentric underpinnings of the evolution of the modern state system and political philosophy (Keita 2020). A Hobbesian logic of self-interest and security obsession characterizes most modern states which makes them less responsive to other concerns, especially that of women and other marginalized sections of society despite being dependent on them in several ways (Steinberger 2008). Women's work for instance is indispensable to any state but their work is often undervalued, equitable access to jobs for women is denied, and their care work is often not even counted as work. In such a context, this article examines the nature of modern states by drawing insights from the experiences of South African women with labour market disparities. The article argues that despite three decades of democracy, gender disparities persist with women facing several obstacles like gender pay gaps, persistent gendered division of labour, and their care labour being ignored or undervalued. It is contended that the persistence of these disparities is due to the masculine, Hobbesian nature of modern states (Hirschmann & Wright 2012) that makes them focus on security and ignore aspects like care and wellbeing which are equally important. The article calls for a reconceptualization of the prevalent Eurocentric Hobbesian understanding of state and argues that the bringing together of feminist care ethics and *ubuntu* allows for the imagining of a 'caring' state which values care labour and sees itself as a caregiver, rather than merely as a security provider. The article argues that such a reconceptualization which sees care as an important political and public good is important at national and global levels to achieve not just gender equality but also for addressing other pressing domestic and global concerns like addressing climate change, achieving social justice, and resolving political polarization.

The article starts by examining the labour marketof South Africa by doing an extensive analysis of data from various sources including the South African government, international organisations, and scholarly works. Based on that analysis, it is argued that the South African state does not give sufficient value to women's work and despite three decades of liberal democracy, South African women face systematic discrimination in the labour market. The subsequent section contends that the predominant reason for this gender disparity is South African state's gendered nature which does not value women's work, especially their care work. It is proposed that the merger of care ethics and the *ubuntu* framework can help in framing 'care' as a political and public good. It is argued that care is a political idea, and this finds resonance in *ubuntu* and feminist care ethics. The article

concludes by identifying future avenues of research opened by this article and argues that the South African experience holds important lessons for all modern states, especially other multicultural and plural countries in the world like India.

Critical Evaluation of Women's Work in South Africa

South Africa has a strong gender gap, like most other states in the world, in its labour force participation. This is not only because of the legacy of racial apartheid laws but also because of prevailing gendered norms within family structures and communities. The apartheid state was a manifestation of gendered conceptualizations of power and authority, and it adversely affected South African women (United Nations Centre Against Apartheid 1978). The apartheid state exploited traditional patriarchal practices of different communities to shape the construction of women's identity in apartheid South Africa for its own benefit. Hence, like colonial states elsewhere in Africa, construction of gender and race was done in a manner that black women in South Africa were erased from public life (Tamale 2020). The apartheid state therefore created the foundations of gendered citizenship in South Africa (Ojha 2015). With the end of the apartheid regime, there was hope among South African women that gender equality will be prioritized, especially because of the progressive nature of the South African constitution. However, after three decades of democracy, the gendered identity of women normalized by the apartheid state persists to a great extent. It has to be noted that in a country as complex and diverse as South Africa, women have an intersectional existence. Thus, apart from gender, South African women's lived experiences are shaped by race, class, space, and other identities (Salo 2007). Yet, gendered conceptions of work impact all women, irrespective of their race, class or other identity, to a considerable degree, highlighting the permeation of gender biases across communities and spaces.

Women were considered non-productive or less productive by the apartheid state because their care work within the family, the rural economy, and as domestic workers was considered private (women's domain) and hence not counted as work. This pattern largely continues in post-apartheid South Africa where women's work is characterized by gender pay gap, concentration in low-skill/low-pay professions, lack of representation in skilled/high paying jobs, and a persistent failure to count the work women do which includes care work and subsistence farming (Mosomi 2019a, 2019b). This exists despite the fact that post-apartheid democratic South Africa adopted a progressive liberal democratic

constitution which is committed to gender justice and racial equality. Moreover, in the past three decades, several legal initiatives were introduced by the state to improve equality in the labour market such as the 'Basic Conditions of Employment Act' (1997), 'Employment Equity Act (EEA)' (1998), 'National Minimum Wage Act' (2018) etc. South Africa is also a signatory to international conventions, protocols, and regional initiatives for gender equality. South Africa has committed itself to women's empowerment, and to end gender-based violence (UN Women 2015). To this end, there are two legal mechanisms in operation - the 'Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act 4' (2000) and the EEA (1998). There are indeed some positive changes with respect to the status of women's work in South Africa in the last three decades of democracy. However, these changes are slow, and they still do not break the larger gendered construction of work that is prevalent in much of South African society.

Globally, labour force participation of women has been on the rise, but this trend masks the fact that many women remain in precarious employments as women work largely in informal sectors (Rogan& Alfers 2019). The apartheid period population census records are not fully reliable as they were impacted by the prevalent racial biases. However, they do reflect global trends as labour force participation of women stood at 23 percentage in 1960, and it increased to 36 percentage in 1985, and eventually to 41 percentage in 1991 (Casale et al. 2021). Based on Post-Apartheid Labour Market Series (PALMS) surveys from 1994-2019, one can observe that the same trend continued, and the growth rate for women was also considerably larger in comparison to men. PALMS surveys show that women's labour force participation increased from 40 percentage in 1994 to 54 percentage in 2019 whereas for men it was an increase to 67 percentage from 60 percentage (Casale et al. 2021). This increase is also reflected in women's share in the labour force (working or looking for work), which increased from 42 percentage in 1994 to 46 percentage in 2019 (Casale et al. 2021). This increase in women's workforce participation is partially explained by the democratic turn in South Africa as restrictions on black African women's mobility and social rights got relaxed with the end of apartheid. This increase was also made possible by affirmative action policies and an increase in women's education standards. Alongside, there was also a rise in the households that were dependent on women as the sole breadwinners (Casale et al. 2021). Further, the gender gap in labour force participation rate was 12.9 percentage in 2014

(Quarter 2) and this reduced to 9.8 percentage in 2024 (Quarter 2). This represented an overall increase of 4.9 percentage in the last decade.

While these are all promising signs, it must be noted that much of this progress for women in the first decades of democracy in employment was concentrated in low skilled jobs, predominantly in the unorganised sector. Moreover, the gender disparity in labour force participation rate persists even in 2024 (Quarter 2) with men's participation standing at 65.6 percentage while the comparative figure for women was only 55.8 percentage (Statistics South Africa 2024). Further, the gender gap in unemployment among those searching for jobs also remains high. PALMS data from 1994 to 2019 show that for women it rose from 24 percentage to 31 percentage while for men it rose from 17 percentage to 27 percentage (Casale et al. 2021). This is when fewer women reported actively searching for jobs than men due to caregiving responsibilities (Posel & Bruce-Brand 2021). The Gender Series Data of South African government released on the occasion of 30 years of democracy highlights further concerns in the labour market (Statistics South Africa 2024). According to that report, many South African women face challenges in accessing economic opportunities due to unemployment. The lowest workforce participation rate is found among women who have five or more children which further establishes the fact that the size of household matters. This is so because women from large families are more actively involved in care work. While national employment rate declined from 2014 to 2024, men's employment rate remains higher than women on a steady basis (Statistics South Africa 2024). The percentage of female headed households relying on women's income increased from 32.4 percentage in 2014 to 36.1 percentage in 2023 alongside a decrease in percentage of those dependent on grants which fell from 63.3 percentage in 2014 to 58 percentage in 2023 (Statistics South Africa2024). However, women were more likely to receive grants, especially in the rural areas and the figure stood at 47.2 percentage in rural areas and 23.1 percentage in urban areas (Statistics South Africa 2024). Managerial positions in public sector companies are still predominantly with men. Women's managerial presence has marginally increased with a 45.2 percentage representation in middle management in 2019 increasing to 46.4 percentage in 2023 while senior managerial roles increased from 42.4 percentage to 45.2 percentage in the same period (Statistics South Africa 2024). Women are also less represented in STEM sector and are mostly distributed in the

undervalued 'care economy' (Casale et al. 2021) such as education, psychology, and health (Statistics South Africa 2024). Although, the percentage of women working in highly skilled work increased from 11 percentage to 13 percentage (Casale et. al. 2021), women remain immensely under-represented in this category.

Further, in neo-liberal economies, entrepreneurship can be one of the most lucrative careers to be pursued but here as well one can see clear gender disparities. The gender difference in self-employed data available through Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) in the context of Total early-stage Entrepreneurial Activity (TEA) in South Africa shows that men are more likely to start a business than women. TEA for men in 2023 was at 12.7 percentage while for women it was 9.7 percentage (GEM 2023, Meyer et al. 2024). GEM 2023 report provides entrepreneurial mindset data based on perceived opportunity, perceived capability, fear of failure, and networking opportunities. In all these, one can see a clear and persistent gender gap. The perceived opportunity for women in South Africa was 61.7 percentage while for men it was 66.7 percentage and perceived capabilities for women stood at 66.2 percentage while for men it was 72.4 percentage. Fear of failure in business for women was 52.5 percentage while for men it was 51.6 percentage and networking opportunities for women stood at 36.7 percentage while for men it was 41.5 percentage. GEM 2023 report identifies barriers to women's entrepreneurship such as cultural and social norms which create imbalance between family caring responsibilities and entrepreneurial aspirations (GEM 2023). Women face hurdles in networking opportunities as many fields are dominated by men. This limits women's ability to obtain mentorship and funding opportunities. Stigma and discrimination against women entrepreneurs result in harmful biases which hinder women from establishing credibility (GEM 2023).

Moreover, women face discrimination even when employed as there is a pay gap between men and women doing similar jobs. While there has been a fall in gender gap in pay in lower end occupations due to the impact of South Africa's minimum wage legislation, there has been steady gender gap in pay in mid to high end jobs between women and men (Segooa 2012: 97). Access to education also affects women's chances of entering the labour force. Women with tertiary education have eight times more chance to participate in the labour force. Among women with tertiary education, unemployment increased from 15.1 percentage in 2014 to 26.9 percentage in 2024. The same figure went up from 28.8 percentage in 2014 to 39.5 percentage in 2024 among women

with matric education (Statistics South Africa 2024). Unemployment was at 10.7 percentage in 2024 for women with graduate education which was a 3.8 percentage increase from 2014 (Statistics South Africa 2024). Thus, education does play an important role but it has to be kept in mind that in South Africa access to education is not equal as it is characterized by gender and racial disparities, thereby playing a role in reinforcing labour force gender inequalities (Dunn and Maharaj2024).

A key dimension of women's work in South Africa is the presence of discriminatory attitudes towards care work. Budlender (2019a, 2019b) argues that despite minimum wage protections, EEA, and other such measures, the lack of improvement in women's wages is due to the fact that their work in public is underpaid as it is seen as care related work and women's work in private (care) is not even recognized as work. By 2019, domestic work became even more feminized compared to other sectors of employment in South Africa (Casale et. al. 2021). The quantitative evidence for the same can be seen from household surveys. 'National Income Dynamics Study' (NIDS 2019) and 'Time Use Surveys (TUS)' (Statistics South Africa 2001, Rubino-Matulevich & Villaz 2019) throw light on women's work in the household. Among the black African community, out of all those who reported themselves as full-time homemakers, 98 percentage were women, and a mere 2 percentage were men. The homemakers did disproportionate amount of care-work, and this was common across racial groups (Statistics South Africa 2001, Rubino-Matulevich & Villaz 2019). In fact, both women homemakers and working women spend more time in household work and care-work than men (Budlender et al. 2001, Budlender & Brathaug 2002). TUS data shows that the average time spent on household work by women was four hours (240 minutes) a day, whereas for men it was less than 100 minutes. It is also important to note that childcare is often clubbed together with other activities of the household and hence the number of hours reported exclusively for child-care would be less in the data (Budlender & Lund 2011). Among working mothers who required assistance in childcare by other family members, the support was provided predominantly by grandmothers which also shows how women's care work spans the entirety of their life cycles (Magadla et al. 2019). Scholars have long argued that childcare has been a hindrance in women's participation in the labour force (Dunn & Maharaj 2024).

Moreover, as noted before, large household size negatively effects women's participation in labour force because the burden of the care of elderly and children fall on women (Button et al, 2018).

Many women might not perceive caring as a burden, but it is definitely a gendered work which remains unrecognised and undervalued. Women earn more when they enter non-care related professions which are still dominated by men (Gardin 2021). They also have better professional careers when their partners share the burden of care-work (Dunn & Maharaj 2024). However, the trend of men and women entering previously gender segregated workspaces has reached a point of stagnation in South Africa which is a cause for worry (Gardin 2021). GEM reports recommend access to affordable daycare, afterschool programmes, and elder-care services as possible solutions (GEM 2023). In this context, the negative role played by the social construct of hegemonic masculinity which expects men to be the breadwinner, the decision maker, and the patriarch of the household also has to be acknowledged as it constructs a masculinity that is antithetical to gender equality, especially in the context of care work which is seen as women's work (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005, Buikema et.al. 2007).

In a diverse country like South Africa, the labour market is influenced by several factors, and it is important to understand them in an intersectional manner. Race especially is an important factor in South African society. Racial inequality is most stark in low skilled jobs. For example, less than 1 percentage of white women were employed in domestic work, compared to 16 percentage of black African women as of 2019 (Casale et. al. 2021). In contrast, 23 percentage of white women were employed in top managerial professions whereas the comparative figure for black African women was just 4 percentage (Casale et. al. 2021). So, the increase in percentage of women in high skilled professional occupations is happening at a relatively much slower pace for black African women in comparison to white women. One can also see clear racial differences in the broader unemployment rate. Unemployment among black African women was 45 percentage compared to 11 percentage for white women in 2019 (Casale et al. 2021). Intersectionality of gender and race can also be seen informing entrepreneurship opportunities among women in South Africa. GEM reports show that lesser number of black African women were entrepreneurs than white women (GEM 2023). Moreover, the diversity of cultural and socio-economic landscapes in South Africa ensures drastically varied experiences among women in South Africa. Apart from gender and race, the geographical space they inhabit also affect the ability of women to take part in the labour force. Rural women's lives are burdened by traditional gender expectations while the economic burden is more

for urban women (HSRC 2024). NIDS 2017 shows that urban women have a higher labour force participation rate of 55.7 percentage compared to rural women whose labour force participation rate stood at 40.29 percentage (NIDS 2017). Further, many rural women engage in subsistence farming but they are counted as unemployed (Posel & Casale 2001).

Hence, a critical examination of the present status of women's work in South Africa indicates that the concerns are many fold, and they intersect with other factors like gender, race, and class. Data indicates that there is a persistent wage gap, women carry disproportionate burden of unpaid or undervalued care-work, and they are concentrated in low-skilled, low-paid jobs and are overrepresented in unemployment (Oosthuizen 2018, Dunn & Maharaj 2024).

Non-western Reimagination of the State: Care ethics and *Ubuntu*

A key reason for the failure of the liberal democratic constitutional framework in South Africa to deliver the promised egalitarian guarantees for women is the inherent patriarchal nature of modern states which prioritize certain categories of jobs and incentivize the continuation of the sexual division of labour (Connell 1990).Modern statest end to not adequately challenge the gender socialisation which results in the persistent gendered distinction between public and the private that gets reflected in the labour market with care work getting seen as private, personal labour that need not be valued. Beyond economic reasons, this is because modern states tend to prioritize what many feminists see as 'masculine' values like power, security, and control over values like 'care' (Brown 1992). Modern states, South Africa included, are therefore largely security states, not 'caring' states. Security, however, includes in its fold the performance of care. Without care, security cannot take place. Care and security are hence co-constitutive. Not recognising care as a public good therefore is a faulty philosophical and political premise. The lack of a 'caring' orientation reflects in the policies of states with respect to their labour markets and in other areas which affect the social and economic lives of their citizens. Hence, the indifference shown to care labour is a reflection of the nature of modern states and resolving it requires an alternate conceptualization of state wherein the state is reimagined with care ethics embedded in its very nature. A 'caring' state has to emerge and only then the indispensable and invaluable nature of care work will be recognised, and the ethics of care will also inform other aspects of

the functioning of the state and this can be transformative for the entire society.

However, a main reason for the inability for many to have an alternate conceptualization of the state is due to the dominance of a Eurocentric understanding of the logic of the state which goes back to Machiavelli and more particularly Hobbes (Forsyth 1979). The Hobbesian social contract is contingent on a particular understanding of 'rationality' which defines self-interest in securitized terms and thereby making the logic of the state essentially about security (Read 1991). Feminist theorizations have challenged the Hobbesian notion of rationality as well as the resultant perspective on state from a care ethics perspective with many feminists questioning the logic of rational choice theories in general (England 1989). Moreover, several non-western conceptualizations of state and politics have gained prominence in recent years which have also challenged the Eurocentric understandings of state and politics. There is a growing realization among academicians that there is an urgent need to move beyond Eurocentric conceptualizations in political theory and international relations (Keita 2020, Kuru 2016, Smith 2018). It is in such a context the idea of *ubuntu* offers an alternate imagination, emerging from African heritage and culture and it complements key insights of feminist care ethics. In fact, as will be argued, feminist care ethics and ubuntu can mutually benefit from a constructive engagement with each other.

A state like South African do not have to look far to become a 'caring' state as the ethics of care and the relational worldview that care ethics proposes is already present in Africa's relational morality as epitomized by *ubuntu*. Contemporary engagements with *ubuntu* (Gouws & Zyl 2015) define *ubuntu* as a relational philosophy, having a worldview of interdependence, an obligation to community, justice, and ethics. This concept of *ubuntu* is further elaborated by Archbishop Desmond Tutu who says that *"a person is a person through other people"* (Tutu 1999: 31). He expands the meaning of *ubuntu* to include values like being generous, hospitable, caring, and showing compassion (Tutu 1999: 31). Gouws and Zyl (2015) argue that in the South African context where Eurocentric ontologies of the state have failed to deliver justice, relational ontologies that focus on human interdependence like care ethics and *ubuntu* can inform each other. Feminist scholarship has a great deal to learn from non-western perspectives as care ethics remains greatly attached with the epistemic umbilical cord of the global north which is limiting and problematic (Gilligan 2011, Noddings 1984, 2010, Tronto

1993, 2001, 2013, 2017, Kittay 2001, Held 2006). It has to move beyond those confines and embrace non-western ideas which are compatible with care ethics like *ubuntu* in order to have global resonance. Similarly, there are several critiques of the communitarian philosophy that underpins *ubuntu*. Communitarian philosophies have been critiqued as upholding gender inequalities in the name of community, and this has led many feminists to question the value of communitarian thinking (Shields & Serna 2011). Hence, reinterpreting *ubuntu* through the lens of care ethics can address some of the limitations of its communitarian underpinnings by giving it a firm political direction that is emancipatory for women and other marginalized sections of society. Thus, feminist care ethics and *ubuntu* can immensely benefit from each other. Gouws and Zyl (2015) differentiate between *"ubuntu-talk"* and *"ubuntu-do"* whereby *ubuntu* is not practiced in its full sense, especially when it comes to gender equality where communal gender prejudices take priority. Gouws and Zyl argue that 'both rights and *ubuntu* have failed women' and yet there is a possibility of merging feminist praxis and *ubuntu* in a manner that the pitfalls of liberal individualism can be avoided (Gouws & Zyl 2015). Individualist human rights framework fails to address the interdependencies and responsibilities attached with human social existence and this leads to ignoring the importance of care and caregiving in society. As an alternative, Gouws and Zyl (2015) propose a feminist ethics of *ubuntu* which reorients society towards 'caring for' and 'caring about'.

In South Africa, as in most other states, the connection between care and women has been naturalized (Gouws & Zyl 2015) so that the political nature of'care' is often missed.Care is not just a condition that makes political life possible, but it is also a political act through which humans as interdependent beings achieve meaning in their lives (Gouws & Zyl 2015). Simply put, this means people can be themselves through others (Tutu 1999: 31). The democratic transition in South Africa happened at a time when globally neo-liberal work conditions became the norm. For many women, neoliberal policies increased the caring burden and care work became more difficult than before due to lack of allocation of resources for caregiving (Abramovitz & Zelnick2010). This was especially true for black African women. This not only affected women's career prospects but even their physical and mental health as even self-care was not a possibility for many women (Gouws & Zyl, 2015). The care deficit in South African democracy affects not just women's work. A participatory, inclusive, and democratic public life demands a caring state that functions as a

care-performer imbibing the principles of feminist care ethics and *ubuntu*. Instead, those who are care givers and those who are in disproportionate need of care are marked out as 'dependent' and they struggle alone**.** This is true for all gendered, classed, and racialized groups who provide care work globally (Heier 2020). This is because, as noted before, the materiality and necessity of care as political good is absent in state discourses about work at present**.** The state does not count care as work and the Hobbesian state does not see caring and relational responsibilities as part of its core functions. As a result, the state forgets that it is the interdependent life of its citizens, all of whom need caregiving at some point in their lives that ultimately makes the state's existence possible. This act of selective amnesia by most modern states is costing their citizens the possibility of a better life and has to be challenged politically and conceptually.

South African state and other modern states should look at care as work, provide the material opportunity for caring and imbibe the political value of care ethics. *Ubuntu* has been often mentioned as an African alternative to the Western framework of abstract individual rights with its focus on relational existence and community. It is argued that feminist ethics of care discourse can reinvigorate *ubuntu* such that a new political imagination can be normalized which values care as a public good in conceptualizing the state itself. Such a reconceptualization has the potential to move the discourse on state from the logic of security to include the logic of care which can open up many possibilities for constructive engagement with key challenges faced at national and global levels. For instance, because the logic driving modern states is predominantly security, securitization theorists argue that in order to make an issue politically important, it has to be securitized which is why some are even trying to securitize climate change in order to elicit strong actions from states (Rychnovská 2014). This essentially means, one has to construct a threat perception and make the state 'fear' something. However, this also results in polarization as constructing a threat is necessarily exclusionary which itself can create more problems than it solves. Moreover, the failure to act adequately by states on issues like climate change shows that threat construction does not work effectively in all scenarios. In contrast, instead of making the state fear, the caring state approach focuses on making the state care, be it about climate change or peace or social harmony etc. Such an approach will be inclusive, transformative, and can help in resolving many domestic and global challenges. Feminist care

ethics and *ubuntu* provide the conceptual basis for conceptualizing and operationalizing such a caring state.

Conclusion

The transition to liberal democracy led the South African state to guarantee the rights of individuals which included equal rights for women. However, there is a conflict between social realities and constitutionally enshrined gender rights in South Africa asgender disparities continue to exist especially with respect to women's work. This article, through an extensive analysis of recent data, highlights how there is still considerable gender disparity in the labour environment of South Africa. Women's work is often ignored and not counted as work. Racial and spatial factors play an important role, further complicating women's access to work in South Africa. One can borrow from Sachs who explained that the place women occupy in South Africa is a 'zone where different patriarchies meet' (1990). This is very much true of the present status of women's work in South Africa. However, it has to be noted that the undervaluing of care work and ignorance of care as a public and political good is a global phenomenon. This is due to the Hobbesian underpinnings of modern states which values masculine values like power and security over care which is detrimental for women and many other marginalized groups in society.

The article suggests a possible way forward through a reinterpretation of the relational approach of *ubuntu* which recognizes individuals as interdependent and feminist care ethics. It is proposed that we expand *ubuntu* relationality to include care as a public and political good. The synthesis of care ethics and *ubuntu* can lead to a better future for all citizens, especially women and other marginalized groups in society. This will be true for not just South Africa but also for other countries of the global south who also have a multicultural and plural population like India. The reimagination of the Hobbesian security state as a 'caring' state can potentially transform the way critical national and global challenges are approached by states, leading to eventually the emergence of a 'caring' international society. This research also highlights the possibility and importance of further explorations of different indigenous knowledge traditions from around the world as they may offer alternate perspectives to the dominant Western conceptualizations.

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Review Article

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF AI ADOPTION AND ECONOMIC IMPACT VIS-À-VIS EARLIER GENERAL-PURPOSE TECHNOLOGIES

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Abstract
This paper explores how the pace and economic effects of artificial intelligence (AI) adoption differ from previous general-purpose technologies (GPTs) such as steam power, electricity, and computers. While historical GPTs transformed economies through gradual diffusion and physical reinvention, AI's digital, cloud-based nature enables an unprecedented speed of adoption and iteration. By analyzing historical productivity data and current AI diffusion metrics, the study reveals that AI compresses the traditional "Productivity J-Curve," producing earlier and sharper impacts. It amplifies productivity through rapid task automation and predictive efficiency but simultaneously heightens inequality and market concentration due to its cognitive displacement effects and data-driven scalability. Drawing on interdisciplinary insights from economics, sociology, and policy studies, the paper concludes that AI's acceleration demands proactive governance—balancing innovation incentives with safeguards for labor, equity, and competition—to harness its transformative potential without repeating the social dislocations of prior technological revolutions.

Keywords
Artificial Intelligence, General-Purpose Technologies, Productivity J-Curve, Economic Transformation, Technological Diffusion

Introduction: General-Purpose Technologies: Engines of Economic Transformation

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There's something catastrophic about the way a handful of technologies—what economists call general-purpose technologies (GPTs)—manage to completely reshape economies, not in one dramatic swoop but through waves of transformation that just keep rolling (Bresnahan & Trajtenberg, 1995, p. 4). These aren't your average gadgets; they're the heavy hitters, embedding themselves across countless industries and supercharging productivity. The magic really kicks in with what's called "innovational complementarities"—basically, when a GPT gets better, everything built on top of it gets a boost, causing productivity to ripple through the economy (Bresnahan & Trajtenberg, 1995, p. 2).

History offers a front-row seat to this phenomenon. Steam power in the late 1700s is the classic example: it sparked the industrial engine, but the big payoff didn't show up until decades later, as factories and railways slowly caught on (Crafts, 2004). Electricity followed a similar script. Though it showed up around 1900, factories clung to their old ways, and only after the 1920s did the shift to small electric motors deliver the productivity surge we now take for granted (David, 1990). Computers and information technology? Same deal. They started shaking things up in the '70s, but real productivity gains took off in the '90s when businesses actually figured out how to use them (Brynjolfsson & Hitt, 2000).

Now, artificial intelligence is stepping up as a potential new GPT. Agrawal, Gans, and Goldfarb (2018) frame AI as a "prediction technology," radically lowering the cost of forecasting and opening doors for smarter decision-making. The OECD (2024) points out that AI isn't just about crunching numbers anymore; it can now perceive, decide, and act with minimal human help, thanks to advancements in autonomy and reasoning (p. 28). Unlike steam or electricity, AI rides on digital rails—it scales quickly and evolves at breakneck speed (OECD, 2024, p. 29).

The bottom line? While steam, electricity, and IT took their sweet time to deliver change, AI's intangible, cloud-powered nature could make its impact much faster and more dramatic. But this rapid-fire adoption also means bigger risks: faster productivity gains, sure, but also sharper inequality, job shakeups, and tough governance questions. As Brynjolfsson, Rock, and Syverson (2021) put it, the "Productivity J-Curve" shows how GPTs can cause early slowdowns before the payoff comes. With AI, that curve might just get compressed—raising the stakes for how society manages both opportunity and disruption.

Historical Adoption Patterns of Previous GPTs

History shows us that the great technologies that transformed economies—steam, electricity, computers—did not arrive with instant impact. Their promise was clear, but their power unfolded slowly, tangled in the costs of reinvention and the frictions of social adaptation.

Steam power is a striking example. Between 1760 and 1830, Britain's factories and mines made only limited use of it—roughly 165,000 horsepower in total. The engines were inefficient, expensive, and poorly integrated into existing systems. The economic returns reflected this: steam added just 0.014% a year to labor productivity, accounting for barely 5% of overall growth (Crafts, 2021).

Electricity repeated this pattern. Edison's New York power station in 1882 signaled a breakthrough, but factories resisted the sweeping redesigns required to exploit it. For nearly 40 years, productivity gains were minimal, with electricity adding only 0.10% a year to labor productivity. The real payoff came in the 1920s, when factory layouts were reorganized around small motors and output surged. In that decade, productivity growth from electricity more than tripled, powered by spillovers from total factor productivity (Crafts, 2021).

Computers and ICT moved somewhat faster, spreading widely from the 1970s, yet they too lagged in economic impact. Productivity acceleration only arrived in the 1990s, when firms restructured around digital systems. From 1974 to 1995, computers and ICT contributed 0.77% to annual labor productivity; from 1995 to 2004, that figure nearly doubled (Crafts, 2021).

Alongside these numbers ran a social story. Each GPT upended work. Steam displaced artisans and manual laborers, triggering riots and Luddite resistance across Europe and beyond (Frey, 2019). ICT hollowed out routine jobs, leaving workers anxious about obsolescence. Yet over time, new roles emerged, wages adjusted, and productivity growth created space for "reinstatement"—the reallocation of labor into new tasks (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2019). Labor shares broadly held, even if transitions were painful.

This long history sets a stark baseline for artificial intelligence. Unlike steam or electricity, AI is not shackled to engines, grids, or factory floors. Its digital, cloud-based nature allows for rapid diffusion and fast iteration. Where past GPTs crept, AI has the potential to sprint. That speed may deliver earlier productivity gains, but it also threatens to compress disruption, amplifying

pressures on workers, institutions, and societies in ways we have not seen before.

Pace of AI Adoption: Accelerants and Barriers

In contrast to earlier general-purpose technologies (GPTs) such as electricity, steam power, or computing, artificial intelligence (AI) exhibits an accelerated diffusion trajectory, propelled by its digital and code-based architecture that seamlessly integrates with existing information infrastructures. Unlike electricity or steam—which demanded extensive capital investments, physical retrofits, and infrastructural reconfigurations—AI scales through software layers, leveraging the pre-existing web, data networks, and cloud ecosystems (Brynjolfsson, Rock, & Syverson, 2021; Acemoglu, 2021). As McElheran (as cited in MIT Sloan School of Management, 2024) notes, AI functions as a "point solution," capable of incrementally transforming discrete tasks without necessitating systemic overhauls.

The rapid improvement of AI models underscores this momentum. GPT-4 surpassed GPT-3.5 within months, achieving performance in the top decile of the U.S. bar exam, an outcome illustrating the self-reinforcing dynamics of scaling laws in machine learning (OpenAI, 2023). Such exponential advances stand in sharp contrast to the incremental progress typical of prior GPTs, where innovation cycles were constrained by physical production limits. (Cockburn, Henderson & Stern,2018)

Adoption metrics corroborate this acceleration. ChatGPT reached 100 million active users in under two months—an unprecedented feat compared to the diffusion of earlier information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Reuters, 2023). Surveys indicate that by 2023, approximately 28% of U.S. workplaces had implemented AI tools, with projections suggesting exposure for up to 80% of employees in the near term (MIT Sloan School of Management, 2024). Concurrently, AI-related patent families expanded by 276% between 2011 and 2016, signaling both innovation intensity and commercial maturation (World Intellectual Property Organization [WIPO], 2020). Yet adoption remains uneven: large firms (with over 5,000 employees) exhibit significantly higher integration rates than small and medium enterprises (Calvino & Fontanelli, 2023), reflecting scale advantages and complementary capital requirements (Brynjolfsson et al., 2019).

Table 1:

Comparative Dynamics of General-Purpose Technology Adoption and Economic Diffusion

Dimension	Steam Power (18th–19th c.)	Electricity (19th–20th c.)	Computing & ICT (20th c.)	Artificial Intelligence (21st c.)
Physical vs. Intangible Nature	Highly physical; required engines, infrastructure, and fuel	Physical but flexible; required electrification of grids	Mixed; physical hardware with digital layers	Purely digital and intangible; runs on existing digital infrastructure
Adoption Speed	Slow (~100 years to full diffusion)	Moderate (~50 years to broad use)	Faster (~25 years for PC/internet adoption)	Extremely rapid (ChatGPT: 100M users in 2 months)
Complementary Investments	Factories, machinery, transportation	Grid networks, wiring, appliances	Software, digital literacy, networks	Data infrastructure, cloud systems, organizational learning
Dominant Capital Type	Physical	Physical + organizational	Intangible (software, IP)	Intangible (data, algorithms, AI talent)
Labor Market Impact	Mechanization displaced manual labor	Electrification improved productivity & working conditions	Automation of clerical work; rise of services	Automation of cognitive/routine work; demand for AI skills
Productivity Payoff Lag	Very long (~80 years)	Long (~40 years)	Medium (~20 years)	Expected shorter lag (~5–10 years) due to scalability
Diffusion Constraints	Infrastructure and cost	Coordination and rewiring	Training and access	Data quality, governance, regulatory uncertainty
Economic Inequality Effects	Industrial concentration	Urban–rural divide	Digital divide	"Superstar firm" concentration and wage polarization
Institutional Adaptation	Industrial regulation and labor law reforms	Electrification policies	IT standards, telecom deregulation	AI ethics, data governance, antitrust adaptation

Despite these accelerants, several structural and organizational barriers persist. The National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) highlights coordination failures and decision-making frictions that impede deployment, especially in complex systems such as healthcare diagnostics (Mullainathan & Obermeyer, 2021). Integration challenges—ranging from data quality and governance to workforce resistance—further slow translation from

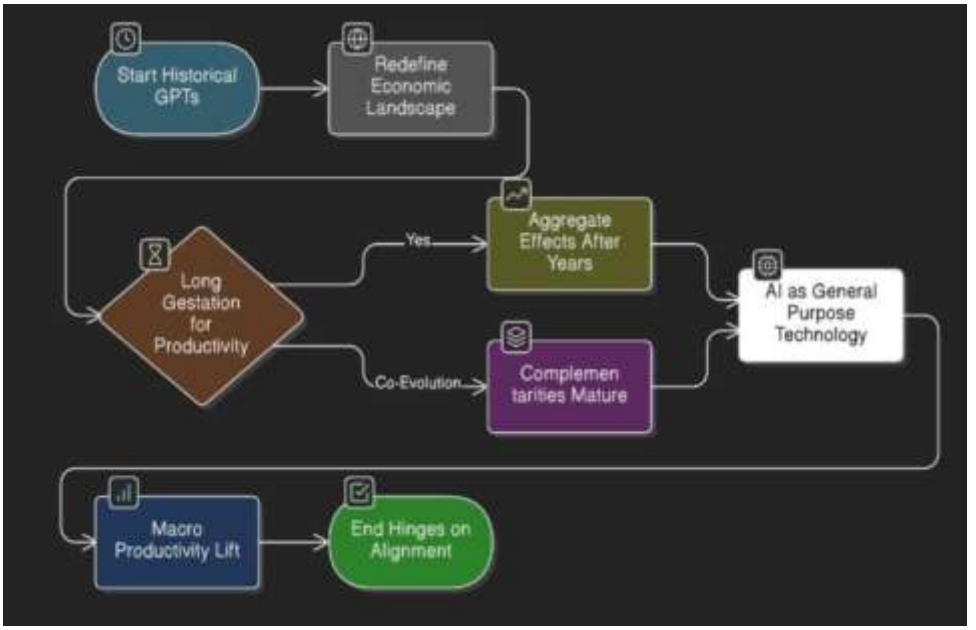
pilot projects to enterprise-wide adoption (OECD, 2023). Moreover, AI adoption follows a "productivity J-curve," wherein initial investments in intangible assets (data infrastructure, algorithmic training, and organizational learning) depress short-term productivity before long-term gains emerge (Brynjolfsson, Rock, & Syverson, 2021). Nonetheless, relative to earlier GPTs, AI's reliance on intangible capital compresses these timelines, allowing diffusion and economic payoff to occur within shorter innovation cycles.

In sum, AI's pace of adoption diverges markedly from prior GPTs in both speed and structure. Its immateriality, modular integration, and scalability make it the fastest-diffusing technology in modern history, though persistent institutional and coordination barriers temper its aggregate economic impact in the near term.

Economic Effects: Parallels and Divergences with Previous GPTs

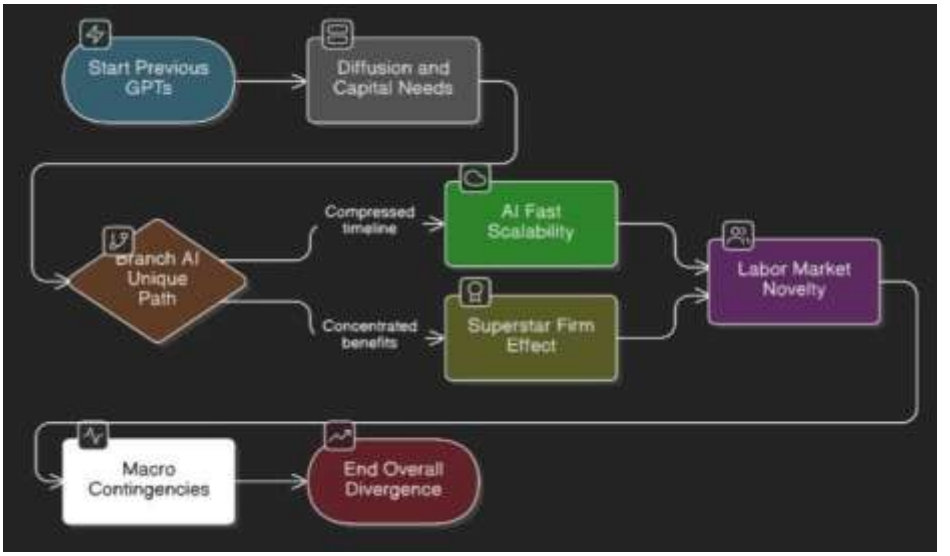
Historically, each general-purpose technology (GPT) has redefined the economic landscape by reshaping production processes, labor structures, and the distribution of gains. Steam power mechanized industry and triggered the first industrial revolution, electricity enabled flexible factory layouts and mass production, and computing automated information flows, ushering in the digital age (Crafts, 2021; David, 1990). In each case, however, aggregate productivity effects materialized only after long gestation periods, as complementary innovations, skills, and organizational adjustments co-evolved (Bresnahan & Trajtenberg, 1995).

AI follows the same GPT logic but compresses the diffusion timeline through its scalability and low marginal replication cost. Unlike electricity or steam, which demanded heavy capital investment and physical infrastructure, AI's economic spillovers emerge from data accumulation, algorithmic refinement, and cloud scalability—forms of intangible capital that propagate faster once established (Brynjolfsson, Rock, & Syverson, 2021). As a result, AI can induce rapid productivity gains in data-intensive sectors (finance, logistics, healthcare), even as the broader economy experiences lagged impacts due to adaptation frictions (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2020).



However, the pattern of economic benefit distribution diverges sharply from earlier GPTs. Steam and electricity democratized productivity by diffusing across manufacturing and utilities; in contrast, AI's gains are concentrated among digital-first firms and economies with data-rich ecosystems (Korinek & Stiglitz, 2023). This "superstar firm" dynamic amplifies income and productivity disparities across both firms and nations (Autor, Mindell, & Reynolds, 2022). Early empirical evidence shows AI-driven firms achieving 15–20% productivity differentials relative to non-adopters (OECD, 2023), yet sector-wide effects remain muted, suggesting a dual-speed economy in which frontrunners extract disproportionate value.

Labor market dynamics also exhibit both continuity and novelty. Similar to past GPTs, AI triggers skill-biased technological change, favoring workers with complementary cognitive or digital skills while displacing routine or codifiable roles (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2019). Yet AI extends automation's frontier into cognitive and creative domains once considered uniquely human, introducing new challenges for reskilling and wage polarization (Brynjolfsson & Mitchell, 2017). The economic adjustment trajectory, therefore, depends less on physical capital deepening, as was true for electricity, and more on human capital adaptation and policy-driven inclusion (Webb, 2019).



In macroeconomic terms, AI's potential to lift total factor productivity (TFP) rivals that of electricity but remains contingent on overcoming transitional frictions. According to the "productivity J-curve" hypothesis, intangible-intensive GPTs like AI initially depress measured productivity due to high adjustment costs, before yielding exponential returns once complementarities mature (Brynjolfsson et al., 2021). If historical analogies hold, the next decade may parallel the 1920s "electrification dividend," when reorganized workflows finally unlocked latent potential (David, 1990). Thus, while AI's diffusion may outpace all prior GPTs, its economic payoff will likely hinge on the same enduring principle: alignment between technological capacity, institutional readiness, and human adaptability.

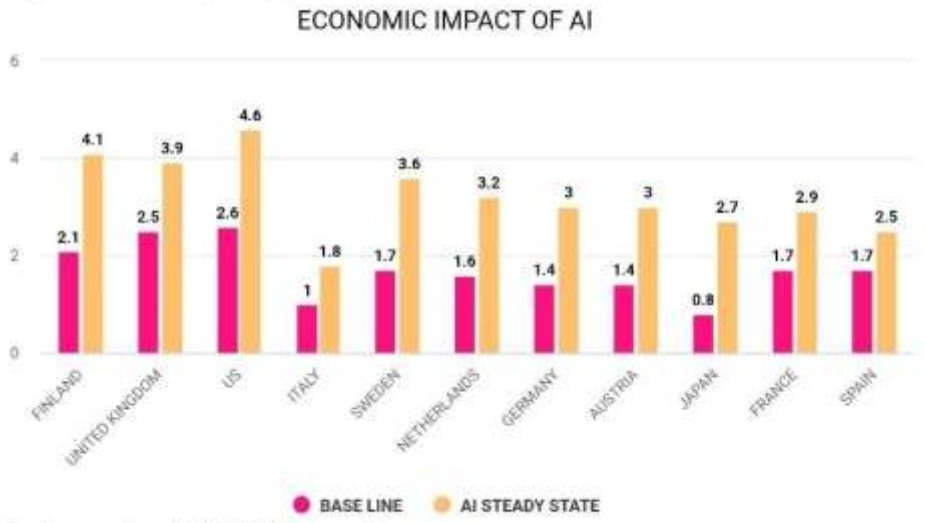
Competing Views, Policy Trade-Offs and Multidisciplinary Insights

The adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) as a general-purpose technology (GPT) promises to reshape economies at a pace and scale that may outstrip predecessors like steam power, electricity, and information and communications technologies (ICT), yet it also risks amplifying inequalities and labor disruptions more acutely due to its cognitive focus and rapid diffusion. Historical GPTs, such as steam and electricity, exhibited long implementation lags—decades in some cases—before yielding widespread productivity gains, often requiring complementary innovations in infrastructure and organization (Crafts, 2021). In contrast, AI's self-improving nature and low barriers to individual

access could accelerate these effects, potentially resolving the modern "productivity paradox" faster than ICT did in the 1990s (Brynjolfsson et al., 2019; Calvino et al., 2025). However, this speed raises trade-offs: while optimists envision transformative growth, pessimists highlight deepened divides, necessitating multidisciplinary policy approaches to harness benefits equitably.

Optimists argue that AI will surpass the transformative arcs of steam, electricity, and computers by enabling quicker resolution of productivity paradoxes through its adaptive, self-tuning capabilities. Brynjolfsson et al. (2019) posit that current sluggish growth despite AI hype mirrors historical delays—such as the 40-year lag for electricity's factory redesigns in the U.S.—but AI's machine-learning algorithms, designed to "improve themselves over time," could trigger "imminent surges" by automating idea generation and reducing R&D frictions (p. 1; see also Agrawal et al., 2019). This view aligns with Crafts (2021), who, analyzing growth accounting, finds ICT's impact accelerated to 1.50% of U.S. labor productivity growth by 1995–2004 after initial paradoxes, and suggests AI could follow suit even faster due to superior modern R&D ecosystems: "Western societies have been getting better at exploiting new technological opportunities so that the impacts are felt more quickly" (p. 531). Recent evidence from generative AI reinforces this: Calvino et al. (2025) report that large language models (LLMs) like GPT-4o now outperform humans in benchmarks for literacy and numeracy, with training compute growing 4.4-fold annually since 2010—outpacing Moore's Law—and spawning innovations across 30+ technology fields, positioning AI as an "invention of a method of invention" (p. 30; citing Bresnahan, 2024). Experimental studies show task-specific boosts, such as 14% higher customer support resolution rates (Brynjolfsson et al., 2023), hinting at aggregate gains of 0.1–1.5% annual labor productivity over the next decade if complemented by skills investments (Acemoglu, 2024; Briggs & Kodnani, 2023). Agrawal et al. (2023) further emphasize AI's unique benefit—lowering prediction costs to enhance decision-making—creating "innovational complementarities" that could drive a "productivity J-curve," with initial intangible costs yielding exponential returns, unlike steam's coal-bound constraints or electricity's infrastructural hurdles.

AI has the potential to double annual economic growth rates in the countries that we analyzed in terms of gross value added (a close approximation of GDP)



Real gross value added (GVA) (%, growth)
Source: Accenture and Frontier Economics

Pessimists, however, caution that AI's velocity could exacerbate economic dislocations more severely than past GPTs, targeting cognitive tasks and concentrating gains among capital owners. Acemoglu and Restrepo (2019) model AI as displacing high-skill jobs faster than reinstatement creates them, echoing Industrial Revolution "woes" but with sharper wage polarization: if displacement dominates, "labour's share of national income falls," potentially halving it over decades (p. 233; see also Frey, 2019, who warns of AI's "brain-targeting" eroding routine and non-routine cognitive roles, backed by Oxford estimates of labor share dips in Tables 3–5). This contrasts with steam and electricity, where labor shares dipped modestly and briefly (e.g., only 2–3% in early 19th-century Britain; Crafts, 2021, p. 533, citing Broadberry et al., 2015). Frey (2019) amplifies inequality risks, projecting AI could automate 47% of U.S. jobs, far exceeding ICT's 9% exposure, and deepen the Kuznets Curve reversal seen in recent decades. Empirical work supports this: Korinek and Stiglitz (2025) find AI adoption correlates positively with wealth disparities, as high-income workers face displacement while capital stocks (e.g., AI infrastructure) accrue to elites, widening the top 1% share by 5–10% in simulations (p. 15). Similarly, an IMF analysis reveals AI may reduce wage inequality by ousting some high earners but "substantially increase wealth inequality" through asset concentration, with low-skill workers hit hardest in developing

economies (Georgieff & Milanez, 2025, p. 22). Acemoglu (2024) quantifies a net GDP boost of just 0.9% over 10 years under baseline adoption, far below optimistic forecasts, due to misaligned incentives in sectors like healthcare where coordination failures (e.g., between doctors and administrators) stall diffusion (citing Mullainathan & Obermeyer, 2021). These views underscore AI's divergence from predecessors: while steam offset displacements via new power applications and electricity via factory efficiencies, AI's cognitive bias risks a "hollowing out" without proactive reinstatement (Agrawal et al., 2023).

Policies must navigate these trade-offs, balancing innovation acceleration with safeguards against unchecked concentration and harms. To spur adoption akin to ICT's rapid 1990s diffusion, advocates push open-source models and R&D subsidies, reducing co-invention costs that slowed steam's rollout (Agrawal et al., 2023). Yet, the EU AI Act (2024) counters risks with tiered accountability, mandating "at least one AI regulatory sandbox" per Member State for safe testing of high-risk systems, addressing privacy pitfalls absent in electricity's unregulated era (European Parliament, 2024, Art. 57). The OECD AI Principles (2019) extend this by promoting competition to dilute big tech's grip—evident in 80% of AI patents held by top firms—while embedding human-centered values, including bias mitigation to avert inequality spikes (Section 7; Calvino et al., 2025, p. 42). Politically, the Hiroshima AI Process, launched in May 2023, fosters G7 consensus on generative AI governance, emphasizing "common vision" for equitable deployment and international standards to prevent a "race to the bottom" unlike the laissez-faire Industrial Revolution (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Japan, n.d.). Multidisciplinary insights highlight sociological levers: reskilling programs could curb Baumol's cost disease in services, where AI automates low-productivity tasks, boosting overall growth by 1–2% if paired with socio-emotional training (OECD, 2024, Section 4.2; Autor, 2024). Economists like Crafts (2021) advocate reducing "adjustment costs" via redeployment subsidies, drawing from ICT's success in offsetting urban-rural divides (p. 541). Behavioral research adds nuance: AI's "black box" opacity may erode trust, slowing adoption more than steam's mechanical transparency, necessitating explainability mandates (Rahwan et al., 2019). Environmentally, AI's energy demands, projected to rival aviation by 2030—pose sustainability trade-offs absent in prior GPTs, urging green compute policies (IEA, 2024). Ultimately, proactive, holistic stances—integrating economic modeling, ethical frameworks, and global cooperation—could

channel AI's "zip" into inclusive growth, surpassing the reactive fumbles that prolonged electricity's inequities and steam's dislocations (Calvino et al., 2025; Georgieff & Milanez, 2025).

Conclusion

In sum, Artificial Intelligence is moving faster than any technology that came before it. Steam power needed almost a century to reshape industry, electricity took decades to reorganize factories and homes, and computers waited until the 1990s to fully transform the global economy. AI, in contrast, runs on digital networks that allow instant diffusion, immediate learning, and rapid scaling. This speed brings early productivity gains but also sharper shocks, workers, firms, and even governments must adapt far more quickly than in past industrial transitions.

The overall pattern still echoes history: new technologies first disrupt, then empower. Yet the difference lies in who benefits and how fast those benefits spread. Evidence from the OECD, NBER, and MIT shows that while leading firms are already seeing significant productivity jumps, others struggle to keep up, widening the gap between digital leaders and laggards. The same applies across countries—nations rich in data, talent, and infrastructure surge ahead, while others risk being left behind.

Therefore, AI's story is not only about algorithms or machines, it is about people and policies. Managing this transformation requires blending economics with sociology and politics to ensure that innovation serves inclusion. If guided wisely, AI can become a shared engine of prosperity rather than a source of new divides. The challenge, as history reminds us, is not just to invent but to integrate, to make technology work for humanity as a whole.

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Review Article

ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS AND MARGINALIZED RURAL WOMEN: A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract
As a social and political doctrine, environmentalism has three components: criticism of contemporary social systems, the expectation of an ideal society, and the search for a path to social transformation. German zoologist Ernst Haeckel first coined the term "ecology" in 1870 to describe the relationship of animal and plant management to the environment. Today the term ecology is not only associated with zoology or biology; apart from this, it is closely associated with various branches of pure science (physics and chemistry) and social sciences, reflecting its interdisciplinary expansion across knowledge systems and policy debates worldwide. Environmental research in all these disciplines has shown that the ideas of conventional economic development and the ideas of modern science and technology are pushing the harmony between nature and society towards destruction, and this is having a negative impact on all living things. Based on such conclusions, environmentalism called for a new attitude to replace the old political and economic development path and alongside the conventional nature-society relationship. The main purpose of my essay is to discuss the various environmental movements that have taken place over the years and the leading role of marginalized rural women in all these movements, their relationship with the environment, their significant steps in environmental development, how their empowerment is linked to this, and what vital role they should play in shaping a sustainable and just future.

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Keywords
Lifeworld, Nature, Deforestation, Environmental Movement, Social Justice

Introduction

Many years ago, people lived by collecting food from the forest, that is, they were hunter-gatherers. Some were good at hunting, some were good at fishing in the rivers, and some were engaged in crop production and collecting fruits and roots in the forests. During this period, people had developed an agricultural-based life structure. But the discovery of metals, namely the Copper Age, the Bronze Age, and finally the Iron Age, and the discovery of various production machinery initiated an unimaginable change in the contemporary economy. The industrialization process and its accompanying massive and uncontrolled production exposed the most naked form of destruction of natural resources. Since the sixties of the twentieth century, movements have been taking place in various countries, especially developing or underdeveloped countries, to protect the environment, which can be included in the new social movements.

The continuous increase in population, unprecedented technological development is continuously putting pressure on the environment and natural resources. As a result of unplanned urbanization, industrialization, deforestation, the amount of various natural resources such as water, land, energy, etc. is decreasing abnormally. And whenever natural disasters occur, the ecological people, especially the marginalized women of rural areas, are the ones who suffer the most. They are called ecological people who are closely connected with the natural environment of their local area to meet their daily needs (Gadgil and Guha, 1995, p.3). These marginalized women in the villages are also directly involved in the resources obtained from this natural environment to meet their daily needs. Therefore, it is very natural that the ill effects of environmental pollution fall directly on them first.

Research Objectives

The main objectives of my research are-

- To discuss the various environmental movements that have taken place over the years and the leading role of marginalized rural women in all these movements.
- To discuss the relationship between women and environment.
- To discuss how their empowerment is linked to this and what role they should play overall in the future.

Research Methodology

This research work is based on content analysis method. The content analysis method is a very effective way of research in socio-political analysis. This research method has been applied to examine the role of marginalized rural women in the environmental movement.

Theoretical Background

'We are living in a social movement society' (Meyer and Tarrow, 1998). But sociologists do not agree on the definition of what a social movement is. Therefore, we will try to understand what a social movement means, without citing what any sociologist has said, in a general way. In general, a social movement refers to the joint organized efforts of a large number of people in a democratic manner with the aim of changing some major or fundamental aspects of society or achieving social justice. However, all social movements start from Grievance; but not all complaints lead to social movements, if that complaint has a concrete basis and if the recognition of identity is associated with it and there is a specific purpose, then a social movement is organized. Therefore, someone rightly said that 'The relationship between grievances, identities and movements is one of mutual cause and effect.' (Guidry, 1992). The essential conditions for a social movement are minimum organization, suitable leadership, and the will and active participation of the members to take the movement forward - which in a word is the driving force of a social movement. Social movement certainly plays a supporting role in social change. But social movement and social change are not synonymous, social change has been going on since ancient times, changeability is the characteristic of society. Therefore, social change does not only occur through social movements, but also through other elements. Social movements are basically organized with the aim of consciously building a better social system. Therefore, every social movement has a history of birth, development, and death or end. Since social movement is a kind of joint organized effort, in many cases social movement and collective behavior are considered to be supportive, but in reality they are never the same. Because collective behavior is chaotic and random, examples of which are riots, craze, etc. On the other hand, social movements are purposeful and organized and directed towards specific goals, for example, environmental protection, women's rights, etc.

New social movements are basically a concept related to the European 'Continental Philosophy' tradition. The main focus of new social movements is the 'Post Industrial Society'. New social

movements have emerged in the context of this social system – which has endowed them with a distinct character; from the social movements organized in the previous Industrial Society. In general, an industrial society refers to a social system where the product-based economy has changed to a service-based economy. In an industrial society, there are 'workers' to produce goods, but that worker is not a 'worker' like in an industrialized society, his character has changed. This worker is much more technology-based, and through professionalism, he advances the capitalist product-centered market system. As a result of the unprecedented development of the communication system, the state and bureaucracy have brought about a change in the mindset and values of the individual through the use of information technology. For this reason, in a larger context, new social movements want to emphasize the Role of Culture, opposing the capitalist product-centered market system and its supporting bureaucratic system. On the other hand, on a small scale, new social movements want to give importance to various regionally-focused issues. Therefore, researchers of new social movements give importance to various issues related to identity - environmental movements, urban social movements, homosexual movements, pacifist movements, women's liberation movements, cultural struggles, which are actually related to student and youth movements.

In this regard, an important word is Lifeworld. The word 'Lifeworld' originates from the French word 'Lebenswelt' which was first used by the eminent Phenomenological philosopher Husserl. Habermas himself also acknowledged Husserl's words on this matter (The Theory of Communicative Action Vol-2, p-119). According to Husserl, what is captured in our experience, more specifically, the search for subject-oriented consciousness, the previous experience of science about the world. Habermas has used this idea in the field of informal way of life of the individual, capitalist market system, administrative structure, etc. Habermas developed the idea of 'Lifeworld' on the basis of the relationship between experience, language and science as a means of communicative action. He shows that it is true that science and modernity are closely related to each other; but no modernity is society-neutral, it is associated with a special type of social system. Which he calls capitalist modernity. This capitalist modernity has broken the individual's own world or Lifeworld customs, values - this relationship has become contradictory. New social movements are organized to escape this situation and protect the 'Lifeworld'.

It is necessary to discuss a theoretical aspect of this work. In this case, the most relevant theory of social movements is the 'Poor

Peoples Movement Theory', which was presented by the American political scientist Francis Fox Piven and the sociologist Richard A. Cloward in their famous book 'Poor People's Movement Why They Succeed, How They Fail' (1977). However, by 'Poor People' they did not mean workers employed in industrial factories or any group of poverty. In the context of the United States, in some cases, white people, in some cases, black women, migrant refugee agricultural workers from the South of the United States, and some migrant urban workers who originally participated in social movements at different times were called 'Poor People' (Piven and Cloward, 1977). In this book, they have tried to show why the 'Poor Peoples' movements succeed and why they fail, by analyzing four movements in the context of the United States from the Great Depression of the 1930s to the post-World War II period, namely the unemployment movement, the industrial workers' movement, the civil rights movement, and the welfare rights movement. They show in their research that rapid and institutional change leads to social chaos and in this situation, the 'Poor Peoples' organize social movements through their grievances. These 'Poor Peoples' or the workplace and the wages they receive from it are not very conscious, as much as they become vocal against it and organize movements when they are deprived of housing, education rights, etc.

Women and Nature

In Indian philosophy, women are compared to 'nature'. They create and nurture. They are compared to 'power', the power that controls this process of creation and development. If we think of nature management in an international context, who do we find at the forefront of protecting the environment and natural resources? The answer is very simple: women; especially those women who live in villages or remote hilly areas, with whom nature is very close. According to Vandana Shiva, "Women have a deep connection with nature based on the experience of creating new life. Just as they (women) believe that their bodies can give birth to new life, they also believe that nature also has that power" (Shiva, 1989, p.43).

Although all women have a close relationship with nature, the rural context is more intimate than that of urban areas. They live much closer to nature than men and this closeness has made them the ultimate protectors of the natural ecosystem. For them, the forest is like their own mother's home. They are completely dependent on their local natural environment, that forest, for meeting their daily needs. They cannot imagine living without the

shade of the surrounding green forest, the diverse ecosystem, the chirping of birds. They have to collect fuel, food, fodder for domestic animals, etc., and the source of this is the forest. There is no reason to think that just because they collect fuel, they are destroying the forest. Women usually collect dry branches and leaves of trees, and their work does not harm the trees.

Village women also do the work of collecting drinking water. Especially in a country like India, collecting water is their only job. They are aware of where to go to get good water. They play a key role in preserving even good water sources (Rodda, 1991, p.51). That is why when a tube well breaks down in a village, they are the ones who suffer the most, because they do not know how to repair a tube well. As a result, they have to carry water from a source far away with great difficulty.Swedish feminist and nature-loving writer Elin Wagner, in her famous book Alarm Clock published in 1941, highlighted the deep relationship between women and nature. Wagner's aim was to make women aware (alarming) about the way plants and animals are being used like machines in the mechanized production system. According to her, the indiscriminate misuse of resources is polluting the environment. She compared the dominance of men over women with the dominance of men over the environment; therefore, she highlighted the relationship between the liberation of women and the liberation of the earth and nature (Peterson and Merchant, 1986).

This debate has been further advanced by American marine zoologist Rachel Louise Carson. In his famous book Silent Spring, published in 1962, he shows how war and toxic pesticides have brought destruction. According to him, soldiers rain bullets to destroy the enemy; and farmers rain pesticides to destroy the enemies (insects) of their fields. He called these pesticides biocides, because the effect of these pesticides is not limited to destroying biodiversity by destroying those insects, but its effect is much wider. He talks about DDT (Dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane) for example. He called this DDT the elixir of death. According to him, in this toxic world, birds will no longer sing in spring. This DDT not only damages the ecosystem, it also causes various deadly diseases in the human body. Farmers and people associated with agriculture come into direct contact with this pesticide when they mix it with water with their bare hands and spread it on the land. Marginal women of the village participate more in agricultural work in the village. And as a result, they are suffering severely physically. Carson has asked women to take the initiative to restore that old tradition to save

nature from the horrors of this machine civilization (Peterson and Merchant, 1986).
In the 1970s, intellectual practice began on the close relationship of women with nature, especially when Esther Boserup's (1970) book "Woman's Role in Economic Development" was published. While reviewing the agricultural system of Africa, she showed that the work of food production among various tribes of Africa is mainly done by women. In addition, at the first World Conference on Women in Mexico City in 1975, the prominent Indian physicist and nature lover Vandana Shiva brought the issue of the relationship between women and the environment to the public. Forest resources are not infinite but severely limited.

Some important environmental movements

To highlight the nature-consciousness of women and the active role of women in the environmental movement, let us go back to 1731 in the village of Khejarali in Jodhpur district of Rajasthan, where Amrita Bai sacrificed her life to protect the village trees. She is called the founder of the modern Chipko movement. When the sepoys came to Khejarali village to cut trees on the orders of the Maharaja of Jodhpur, first Amrita Bai and later many villagers came forward after seeing her. More than a hundred people died in this movement. In the end, the Maharaja was forced to withdraw his order after facing strong resistance from the villagers.

A similar movement to the movement started by Amrita Bai in 1731 was started in Uttar Pradesh in 1973 by Bachni Devi, Gauri Devi, Sudei Devi and others. In the pages of history, it is known as the Chipko movement. This movement began in 1973 in Gopeshwar village of Chamoli district of Uttar Pradesh against the indiscriminate cutting of trees by a sports equipment company. When the government's forest department allowed some traders and contractors to cut trees, the local tribal people of the area, seeing no way to protect the tree resources, started a movement in an innovative way under the leadership of Dasoli Gram SwarajMandal to save the forest. The concerned hill people, especially women, succeeded in stopping the cutting of trees by hugging the trees (Guha,2000, p.115-119).
The Chipko movement was initially more a conflict between the desire for profit and survival than a movement for forest protection. We have already discussed that women in rural hill areas depend on the forest for their livelihood. In an agrarian economy, the ill effects of forest destruction and environmental

degradation primarily fall on women. Because they are closely connected to nature. There was a song in the mouth of the women of this region about this movement that said "The land is mine, the water is mine, this forest is ours, our ancestors created it, we will protect it..." Under pressure, the government banned the felling of trees in that region and declared a vast area as a protected forest. Moreover, the central government ordered a ban on felling of trees for 15 years in 1980.

In the context of the Chipko movement, the government's decision created a new problem. By declaring the forest as a protected area, not only the businessmen and contractors but also the local indigenous people lost the right to use the forest. However, the forest is closely related to the livelihood of these local indigenous people, especially the women of that region. Falling into the trap of government rules and bureaucracy, their livelihood became uncertain. As a result of this violation of their natural rights, the women of that region started a tree felling movement in the 1990s, which was the opposite of the Chipko movement. But this movement of the women of that region can never be called an anti-environmental movement. This movement was a movement to survive by using the environment properly. Where else would people get their livelihood from except the environment? This was the main objective of the tree cutting movement.

The movement to save the forest of the tribal women of Asna village in Bastar district of Kerala is known as Asna Movement (1987). Asna village is a small village surrounded by forest. Although the local forest was protected by the government, influential people used to cut wood and sell it to the tribal people at high prices. In such a situation, the forest department again announced that all the trees currently in the forest would be cut down and new forests would be created. For this purpose, the forest department started the work of enclosing the entire forest with wire fences. As a result, the tribal women in that area were losing whatever opportunity they could have used the forest.

A group of 30-40 tribal women led by MiktiBai, a tribal woman from the village, appealed to the village Kotwar (inspector), Patel (tax collector) and Sarpanch (head) to take up the issue of the tribal women with the government and stop the forest department from taking this step. But they did not assure any help to the tribal women. Then the women decided that they would have to do something about it. They contacted Iqbal, an official of a local NGO (AdivasiHarijanKalyanSamiti). On Iqbal's advice, they started an active movement by breaking the wire fence and driving away the forest workers.

The administration kept pressuring the men, saying that if they did not stop their wives and daughters from this movement, the government would be forced to arrest them. As a result, unrest started between husbands and wives in every house. But despite this, the women did not give up. After this, about 2000 tribal women submitted a memorandum to the district collector. In it, they demanded that the government should not cut down a single tree and that this fence should be completely removed. Permission should be given to collect firewood from this forest and their domestic animals should be allowed to roam. They are opposing afforestation. But the forest should not be fenced, because they use that forest for their livelihood. Ultimately, all their efforts were successful. The government accepted their demand. Since then, the women have been protecting this forest' (Kalland and Pearsoon, 1998).

Recently, in 2009, a new movement similar to the Chipko movement was born in Sirmaur district of Himachal Pradesh by the marginalized women of that region. The central government decided to build the Renuka Dam on the Yamuna river in Sirmaur district to supply drinking water to the city of Delhi and generate hydroelectricity. However, to quench the thirst of Delhi, about 700 hectares of forest land will have to be destroyed and about 1000 families will be affected as a result. In this context, local women started a movement in a novel way to save the forest. They compared the tree to their brother and started tying rakhis on the tree. They claimed that they would not let their brother (tree) be killed as long as they lived. Considering all the aspects, the National Green Tribunal has recently issued a stay order on this project.

Another important environmental movement in the history where women have played a very important role is the Green Belt movement in Kenya. Nobel laureate WangaraMaathai launched this movement on World Environment Day in 1977. The main objective of this movement was to prevent the massive deforestation in Kenya and to empower rural women to make decisions about environmental conservation. In addition, it was a movement to transfer technology from expats to the common people. Village women were involved in the work of forest creation in a planned manner with the help of advanced technology. Through this movement, about 30 million trees were planted by 2005 (Guha, 2000, pp.102-104).Through this program, the important steps taken by the women of that region caught the attention of the whole world.

In Kenya, in the 1980s, Kenyan women began a movement against large foreign corporate companies. The biggest problem in that country was that foreign companies controlled the country's agriculture. Instead of growing food crops, women in most parts of the country were forced by their husbands and the government to grow coffee for the benefit of foreigners. They not only fought against these foreign companies, but also spoke out against the tyranny of this male society. They continued this movement for several decades. In the end, the movement lasted until a democratic government was established in Kenya and this democratic government was able to solve such problems to some extent through land reform.

Conclusion

Currently, marginalized women in villages are not only struggling against this alarming trend of the world, but they have also joined hands to change it. Through the formation of various domestic or international non-governmental organizations, many women have not only tried to show the world that they have the right to participate in resolving this critical situation of the environment, but they have also tried to show their unique relationship with the environment, that is, their unique needs, responsibilities and their correct understanding of natural resources. The importance of the positive role played by marginalized women in movements such as Chipko movement, Asana movement, Green Belt movement etc. is multifaceted. The issue of women's empowerment is also involved with this. If we look at it carefully, we will see that all these movements were mainly against men. Through these movements, they have not only saved the environment, but through them they have snatched their just rights from men.

The suffering of women due to environmental pollution, deforestation, overpopulation, etc. is very different from that of men. Researchers at the United Nation Chronicle have found a link between DDT and Breast Cancer. In addition, the World Health Organization has found that women who come into contact with pesticides without covering their hands and face are at high risk of miscarriage. Such serious health problems make women more responsible for the environment.

Mothers have an important role to play in this. It is said that mothers are the first educators of children. They play an important role in shaping the personality of the child. If the initial problem can be solved in any way, then the problem becomes much easier to solve. Mothers will teach their children in such a way that a sense of respect for the environment and the values of

biodiversity is awakened in their children from the very beginning. It is necessary to teach them to love nature, not to destroy seedlings unnecessarily, to encourage planting trees, not to litter everywhere, etc., from childhood. Until our thinking and values change, no matter how many national or international conferences are held, it will never be possible to eradicate this cancer-like disease.

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Review Article

MOTHERHOOD, CLASS, AND ALIENATION IN LEÏLA SLIMANI'S *'CHANSON DOUCE'*

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Abstract
This study analyzes motherhood, class, and alienation in Leïla Slimani's Chanson Douce, with a particular emphasis on how class dynamics affect the psychological and social aspects of modern motherhood. It looks at the limitations that surround Slimani's construction of maternal identity, especially as it relates to caretakers and the children they look after. The study examines the ways in which social structures and uneven economic circumstances depict vulnerability via the use of theme analysis. Additionally, it uses the commodification discourse to illustrate how class systems affect emotional wellness, caregiving relationships, and identity. The study contends that in addition to posing moral and affective queries on caring, Slimani's story demonstrates how stereotypes and social pressures influence mothers' experiences. Finally, the research adds to the current discourse on the redefining of motherhood in the modern, economically complicated, and socially stratified world.

Keywords
Care Work, Class, Commodification of Caregiving, Maternal Identity, Motherhood

1. Introduction

The novel "Chanson Douce" by Leïla Slimani offers a profound commentary on the expectations of modern society toward motherhood while deftly examining the subtle relationships of

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class, alienation, and motherhood. As with the work itself, I am more interested in analyzing the socio-political pressures placed on women who are perceived as "mad" or "bad" mothers—that is, women who are trapped by and subsequently within the institution (realization) of motherhood, but who do not suffer from the personal épanouissement or other-facing maternal altruism that is described as its quasi-physiological postpartum side effects or not all the time, anyway. The maternal ambivalence that permeates the mothering experiences depicted in the work and the resulting desire to challenge the binary conceptions of the good or bad mother and substitute them with a co-existing dyad—the majority of mothers, according to the text and this article, are both—is what I find interesting (McIlvanney, 2023). The situation of the mothering figure in the text serves as a solid foundation for this ambivalence. Chanson Douce emphasizes how class and the resulting social alienation, rather than biology, significantly influence our experiences as working mothers and how individual women's choices—or lack thereof—shape their reactions to having children (Arens, 2020). Simone de Beauvoir states in Le Deuxième Sexe II: "It doesn't have a "denaturée" mother because maternal love isn't natural, but specifically because of this, it has bad mothers" (Beauvoir 1949, 386). In her groundbreaking work L'Amour en plus, philosopher Elisabeth Badinter argues in favour of this viewpoint. Still, she notes that the more humanizing—and erratic—word mother love tends to supplant the phrase maternal instinct in contemporary discourse(Marcelli & Nata-, 2015). We are reminded of the relative recentness (the end of the eighteenth century) and, ultimately, artificial origins of the belief that love is a prerequisite of all marital and familial relations by Badinter's historical overview of the perception of maternal love in France from the seventeenth century to the present. On the other hand, Chanson Doude recognizes the variety of shapes motherhood can take as an experience, many of which go against our strict, institutionalized definition of ideal mothering(Lachman, 2023).

Chanson Douce is one of several modern Francophone works that challenge or, at the very least, subvert prevailing narratives of glorified mothering. Whether through their portrayal of "mad" moms (Leïla Marouane's Le Châtiment des hypocrites [2001]) or "bad" mothers (Fête des mères [2009]), these texts demonstrate the ideological limitations that motherhood is subject to and attempt to alter them. Others, like Marie Ndiaye's La Vengeance m'appartient (2021), Laurence Tardieu's Le Jugement de Léa (2004), and Véronique Olmi's Bord de mer (2001), go further and relate cases of infanticide, which is seen by society as the

unmistakable proof of "bad" mothering. Gill Rye's significant study on French and Francophone Narratives of Mothering, which contends that "mothering, as both theory and practice, is currently being contested and interrogated across several different fields of inquiry," is one of the recent critical texts that also question the constrictive behavioural paradigms that dictate "good" mothering. A second indication of a paradigm shift is the release of Stéphanie Thomas's Mal de mères (2021), a compilation of ten testimonies of maternal regret. This work focuses on the later phases of mother-child relationships rather than the typical postpartum phase. Theoretical texts like Orna Donath's Regretting Motherhood (2017), fictional works like Elena Ferrante's The Lost Daughter (2008, 2021) and its most recent film adaptation, as well as more widely read journalistic texts like Eliane Glaser's Motherhood (2021), all demonstrate an interest in broadening ideas of what constitutes appropriate maternal behaviour.

Despite Chanson Douce's enormous financial success, it has received comparatively little critical notice. The two analyses that most closely resemble mine are Julie Rodgers' (2020)(Rodgers, 2020) study of the darker side of caregiving in Chanson douce, which focuses on the oppressive situation usually experienced by the caregiver and the lack of (self)care they encounter, and Lorenza Starace's (2019) article on the uneasy disruption of readerly expectations and the inherent ambivalence that characterize Slimani's postcolonial literary paradigms and authorial positions.

2. Literature review

A cross-cultural comparative study of motherhood and nanny care methods in various countries was carried out by Jackson & Williams (2023)(Williams, 2023). According to the study, cultural norms and expectations about mother responsibilities and nannies' engagement in child care varied. It emphasized the importance of considering sociocultural settings while analyzing the new flaws in modern parenting and the effects of nanny care on kids' wellbeing. These viewpoints draw attention to the identity and social changes of becoming a mother. But Jackson and Williams ignore an essential component of managing a household: the manipulative tendencies and mental health issues that some mothers and nannies experience.

Building on the conclusions above, Thompson (2024)(Romo, Abetz, & Thompson, 2024) investigates the moral implications of mothers' decisions to assign nannies to care for their children. The research critically examines the possible benefits and drawbacks

of nanny employment and the ethical issues that women encounter when making these decisions. The findings underscore the need for a deep understanding of the complex moral landscape surrounding contemporary parenting and the importance of prioritizing the child's interests in these schemes. Similarly, Charman (2021)(Taylor, n.d.) also posits that motherhood is a political construction notwithstanding its framing within social and historical contexts. Mothers are critical to the nation-state because they produce good citizens and maintain social and political boundaries throughout the home. In this regard, Charman (2021) dismisses the need to reconcile the safety and wellbeing of children with social and political objectives.

Similarly, a quantitative study by Brown (2021)(Brown et al., 2021) This literature investigated how maternal employment affects children's development in nanny-using families. According to the findings, children's cognitive and socio-emotional development are fundamentally tied to the quality of the nanny-child interaction. In addition, the research highlighted the openness of communication between mothers, nannies, and parents as being healthy for better outcomes for children. But still, the minute details involved in the rearing process and the critical position that the biological mothers enjoy in giving their best to the child are omitted in the argument presented by Johnson and Brown.

Qualitative research that explored the views of working mothers who relied on nannies for childcare was also undertaken by Smith (2020)(Linda K. Smith, Anubhav Bagley, 2020). Within the results, it was observed that even though mothers appreciated the help from nannies, they were also afraid of the dangers and challenges of handing their children over to strangers. The research has underlined how important it is that mothers choose suitable nannies so that good rapport builds up to protect the safety and healthy, sound wellbeing of children. However, though biological mothers share a bond with their kids, Smith's argument has failed to understand the depth of the accumulated frustration and resentment dominating the minds of nannies who, even though they carry those feelings of having been made fun of, cheated, and enslaved, still do not find room to react accordingly.

In light of the dilemma writers from postcolonial nations frequently face, (Lorenza, 2019) analyzes Leïla Slimani's Chanson douce (2016). The reception of (im)migrant authors is rife with inconsistencies and paradoxes, whether marginalized to the status of "francophone literature" by the French literary milieu or accused of cultural imperialism by their community of origin. I

contend that Chanson douce embodies many unresolved contradictions that define the "becoming-transnational" of French and francophone studies, drawing on the literature-monde debate and its effects on French, Francophone, and postcolonial studies.

3. Methodology

This study applies a theme-based methodology to explore the intersections of motherhood, class, and alienation in Leïla Slimani's Chanson douce. Through focused thematic analysis, this approach will examine these themes as presented in the novel, drawing into them any complex social and psychological elements that influence the maternal experience.

First, thematic analysis can start from close reading through Chanson's douce and finding repeated motifs and symbols associated with motherhood, class differences, and alienation. This would necessitate scrutiny regarding how Slimani's structures and character interplay at a deeper level of social hierarchy and power play. Much importance is thus attached to the language and discourses used to represent the protagonist's experiences with motherhood in a class-divided society, revealing which socioeconomic status and alienation define who she is and interacts with. Each theme identified—motherhood, class, and alienation—is discussed singularly but about one another. For instance, motherhood is analyzed not only as an experience in isolation but also as one that highly depends upon class constraints, where the expectations and constraints placed on the maternal role vary across different social strata. In like manner, the theme of class is explored in terms of economic dependency, power imbalances, and how the effects of societal expectation build isolation for characters. Alienation is seen, therefore, both as an effect of these class divisions and as a particular emotional experience that affects the health and identity of mothers.

This thematic approach articulates how Slimani's depiction of mothering can unpack broader social concerns, such as the way class makes classed subjects feel isolated and estranged. Since this research focuses on themes rather than quantitative data or external surveys, results from this qualitative, text-based analysis will be based on how Slimani's narrative deconstructs contemporary mothering in a socially stratified world. These are insights extracted through this theme-based methodology, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the interplay between motherhood, class, and alienation in Chanson's douce, culminating in a rich, textually grounded perspective on Slimani's portraiture of the maternal experience. The exercise reinforces the

foundation of the study to literary analysis again, thus building further on and expanding the thematic framework of layered complexity surrounding motherhood as defined within a modern, class-conscious society.

4. Findings of the study

4.1. Motherhood

Chanson Douce by Leïla Slimani is a book that is written based on a horrific real-life event reported all over the world. This novel focuses on children's vulnerability and the possibility of cruelty enacted among adults and nannies by the activities of a nanny whose suspicion immediately arises as if she brutally kills two small kids who are entrusted under her care. French-Moroccan author Slimani, who is herself a mother, uses this tragedy as inspiration to explore the intricate world of nannies. The unthinkable is turned into art in her hands, inspiring an examination of the flaws in parenthood and the disturbing dynamics in the story.

In terms of characterization and narrative components, the novel begins with the terrifying statement, "*The baby is dead*," which establishes the horrific crime that the nanny, Louise, committed against the children, Mila and Adam (Leila Slimani, 2017). Reviewers of the book, however, frequently suggest that the mother was responsible for the catastrophe, which moves the emphasis from "who" or "how" to "why"(Agwu, 2023). As she looks to return to the workforce, Myriam, a committed law student now a stay-at-home mother, and her husband Paul, a music producer, look for the ideal nanny to look after their kids. The mysterious central figure, Louise, enthrals the family with her perfect manner and gradually takes charge of their lives.

Considering the topics and narrative decisions examined in the sample text, Slimani's story develops clearly and grippingly without sacrificing the readers' feelings or the characters' outcomes. While including several viewpoints adds complexity and suspense to Louise's story, the author's journalistic expertise is apparent through hints of reportage style. The novel reveals that no one is entirely innocent or guilty except Louise, as it strikes a careful balance between conspiracy and the imperfections of parenting (Slimani, 2016). The idea of miracles is rejected by Slimani, who instead emphasizes the situations that motivate parents to strive for perfection and the effects of their imaginations on their kids.

The slain children, Mila and Adam, are shown as multifaceted individuals who balance danger and safety, conscious of their power over the adults in their immediate vicinity within the context of the horrific conspiracy and the representation of children(Leila Slimani, 2017). Despite appearing sincere, Louise's relationship with the kids and their parents belies a darker side marked by compulsive behaviours and a frantic attempt to forget her challenging history. In addition to Louise, Myriam is also held accountable for the conspiracy as she abandoned her young children to focus on her job(Leila Slimani, 2017). Additionally, Slimani examines the paradoxes of contemporary parenting in a world entirely of potential catastrophes in the section on parental paradoxes and societal expectations. Myriam and Paul are unthinkingly confident in their capacity to keep things under control, but they are also terrified for the safety of their kids. When Miriam observes Louis playing with Mila and Adam, she is vulnerable to unwarranted embarrassment and exposed to the intricacies of a parent's relationship. An introduction to the psychoanalytic perspective by Freud highlights the mother-child connection and offers an analytic lens for analysis of how Chanson Doue portrays maternal relationships.

Slimani deliberately keeps Louise as an enigma character, thus leaving it to the readers to understand her intentions even when parts of the book are narrated through her perspective. Louise has been depicted as a symbol of parental anxieties and safety standards rather than a psychological reality per se (Slimani, 2016). By deliberately keeping Louise as an enigma, the author has amplified the ominous and eerie ambience of the book while challenging the readers to come to terms with the fears of modern parenting.

Chanson Douce by Leïla Slimani masterfully analyzes the complexities of family dynamics and the imperfections of parenting. Themes and plot choices in the novel underlined the thin dividing line between safety, restraint, and dependency. Bringing forth a critical question through Louise, Myriam, and Paul, Slimani has tried to raise various questions about the concerns and insecurities of parents and the challenges in providing security within an insecure climate. After all, Chanson Douce is a chilling story that unfolds before us: How much of society's expectation do mothers have to bear? What complexities are formed inside this institution of motherhood?

4.2. Class struggle

In Chanson's douce, Leïla Slimani presents class as the insidious force shaping the lives and relationships of her characters, primarily through the dynamic between Louise, the working-class nanny-and her middle-class employers, Myriam and Paul. In the narrative, Slimani probes into how the divisions of class not only are an influence on the material conditions of characters but also the emotional landscapes and the sense of self (Akdoğan, 2024). Through the thematical analysis of class representation in the novel, Slimani proves how social and economic status depends on power arrangements, thus affirming the social hierarchies and influencing personal identity, asserting that it is through the subtle yet pervasive way class differences occur alienation and disconnection(Howell, 2017).

As a working woman, a precarious and subservient class position situates Louise beneath the economic status of both Myriam and Paul. Slimani forms her character with the struggle and sacrifices involved in this kind of role, thus turning the character of Louise into both indispensable and invisible for the house family (Starace, 2019). As the story unfolds, Louise's identity is conflated with her work. In a society that soon deprecates her job, her classism-driven labouring constitutes a desperate effort for class validation. The focus is, therefore, on the class as a social wall shaping her possibilities and self-esteem. For instance, Slimani elaborates on Louise's routine and the interactions between her and her family members in detail, creating such a picture of an individual performing sexual, familial chores often regarded as a matter of course by her employers. These interactions reveal a power dynamic between Louise and her employers, describing the class as an activity that makes her submit to a position that deprives her of power and dignity(Lehrer, 2020). Even though she is essential to the care of their children and the maintenance of their home, the narrative repeatedly speaks to her in terms of this role, not as someone her equal. Slimani thus continues to utilize Louise's situation to demonstrate how class ties her to a life of servitude devoid of any spirit of belonging or personal accomplishment.

The middle-class position that Myriam and Paul hold provides them with a very different life; they can enjoy such privileges and freedom because of their wealth. Slimani, in these characters, tries to discuss the issue of class privilege, leading to entitlement and separation from the lives of the less fortunate. This privilege is embodied in Myriam's choice to return to work and, therefore, in her selection of Louise to assume care for her children and perform household chores. Such an arrangement positions

Myriam's motherhood within a framework of choice and pragmatism, a framework that is only made possible through her economic capital. Slimani accentuates this theme by linking Myriam's professional aspirations with Louise's economic dependency. For Myriam, economic security allows personal ambition and self-expression, while, for Louise, a similar level of protection does not seem within reach- a life stuck in service as if time stood still around her (Achille & Achille, 2022). This only makes the class dimension at play evident, which will also have her professional improvement resting on the labour of someone else- Louise- an arrangement that Slimani sees as oppressive. Through Myriam, Slimani presents how class privilege clouded sympathy and comprehension, leading to a lack of feeling for the struggle of those who made comfort and prosperity possible.

Slimani deepens the class theme by giving insight into its effects on Louise's psychological state, showing how insecurity and insecurity impose reductions upon her self-confidence. In this respect, for example, poverty and exclusion enhance vulnerability and fragility in more ways than one. Slimani illustrates that the desire for acceptance, which Louise wishes to earn from the family she serves, gradually translates to emotional dependency through economic dependency. This dependence comes alive through Louise's desperate yearning for validation and belonging. Yet, Slimani highlights the class differences that bar her from fully belonging to the family(Yasmin, 2020). When Louise becomes further enmeshed in the household dynamics, her sense of self crumbles into resentment and longing. Slimani uses the emotional arc to describe how class inequality creates an impossible chasm between caregivers and employers and how they labour. Louise is both a source of meaning and a reminder of her social isolation. In this regard, a class position, as perceived by Louise to transcend beyond her class position with a failure to do so reflects there is a psychological cost in terms of economic precarity to those in subservient positions, framing class as not only financial but also as a division of personal fulfilment.

The class representation of Slimani comes across as some form of illumination of how commodified human relationships are in the novel. Professional and personal life becomes blurred as Louise assumes an ever more intimate role in the household, yet strict class lines enforce an emotional distance. Louise repeatedly attempts to make genuine relationships with her bosses. Still, she is always brought back to realizing her subservience, signifying that true intimacy cannot exist within the boundaries of their economic exchange(‘No Title’, 2022). Slimani presents

commodification as part and parcel of the class structure wherein even such an intimate activity, raising one boss's children, becomes transactional. The depiction of how Louise gradually realizes her expendability further solidifies Slimani's concept of the dehumanizing potential of class over interpersonal relationships. By focusing on such a foundation, the story comes out to reveal that Louise's emotional hunger for being accepted and becoming a sort of surrogate mother is replaced by the bitter reality of her dispensability, a harsh reality reminding her that her connection to the family remains defined by this newly formed economic hierarchy. This tension between Louise's investment and her economic reality reflects how class commodifies people, turning actual acts of care into impersonal services that can be bought and sold.

Slimani also highlights the distinction between Myriam and Louise's experience of motherhood, which is constructed through their class positions. Myriam has privilege, summed up in the capacity to outsource parts of motherhood to Louise; that is class privilege, a privilege underwritten by the labour of working-class women. This sets motherhood up both as a privilege and a burden, and Slimani shows how socioeconomic status is articulated through the ways women experience and perform motherly roles. While Myriam can balance career and family life free of charge, Louise is tied to care responsibilities for which she does not receive emotional or financial rewards, which typically go to mothers. Slimani criticizes this imbalance, unveiling the paradox of care work: working-class women like Louise are called to care for other people's children while balancing their economic difficulties. This disproportionate burden of care speaks to the way class divisions shape women's rights and choices, suggesting mothers are a privilege for a few while it's a burden on others, sifted through the sieve of class.

Ultimately, Slimani's exploratory examination of class leads to the alienation theme since Louise's social and economic status leaves her isolated from working within a family framework and detached from who she is. The difference in Louise's role in the family and her social status cuts a gulf in her emotional world; she is neither a total participant in the family nor can she come to develop an identity outside of this work. This alienation intensifies because Louise's desire for belonging collides with the reality of her expendability, underlining the isolation imposed by class boundaries. Through Louise's alienation, Slimani makes a compelling commentary about the dehumanizing effects of socioeconomic inequality, making her more like a spectre caught

within a liminal space between servant and kin. As the novel progresses, Louise's sense of isolation deepens, revealing how class divides not only limit material opportunities but also erode emotional and psychological wellbeing. In this way, Slimani connects the theme of class to the broader experience of alienation, suggesting that the structures of economic inequality foster a profound sense of disconnection and disempowerment in those relegated to society's margins.

4.3. Alienation

A large portion of *Chanson's douce* is set in the apartment of the upwardly mobile Massé couple. For Myriam, the mother, and, as the work comes to a close, Louise, the nanny, this household (dis)location serves as a kind of spatial pressure cooker, creating a monde à part that is becoming more and more isolated from the outside world. "The feminine question is a spatial question," as Slimani states in Le Parfum des fleurs la nuit. It is impossible to comprehend the dominance that women experience without studying geography and assessing the constraints placed on their bodies by clothing, locations, and other people's perceptions (Beno, Silen, & Yanti, 2022). Slimani reminds us of the primary politics of the home every day in Chanson douce, a term often associated with the uninteresting and unremarkable. According to her, it is a Hegelian arena with a never-ending struggle for dominance. Women, in particular, are expected to excel in so many fields that are mutually exclusive that the master-slave dialectic can also manifest as an internal conflict over the expectations of society regarding domestic and maternal roles. The relationship between an employer and a nanny is particularly relevant to the master-slave antinomy. Être autrui désigne une subordination, mais aussi une aliénation de la liberté, as Geneviève Fraisse states in Service ouservitude. In this way, men who worked in the home were excluded from the French Revolution's citizenry. They were not free to be political subjects because they depended on their master (Fraisse, 2021). The economic and political hegemonies that govern this employer-employee relationship, as well as the general social and mediatic invisibility of the nanny figure, and the fundamental isolation that characterizes her position, are partially explained by the fact that being a nanny is one of the few jobs where "service" remains at an exclusively individual level and is located within the private domain. Other jobs that are comparable to this include domestic cleaners and elder care providers. "Is there something that keeps it hovering under the radar, a kind of devalued preoedipal

downstairs juxtaposed against the more privileged oedipal upstairs and its fairly limited/inevitable cast of characters?" Susan Scheftel poses this query about the nanny subject (Scheftel, Ph, & Scheftel, 2012). Being the other mother to Adam and Mila and the other child to Myriam and Paul (the "devalued preoedipal"), Louise is in a situation where she is constantly being othered. She can access the Massé at their most intimate moments but can never be anything more than a usurper, a subaltern other.

Chanson Douce shows a Sartrean-like hui close to three people, connected but secluded. The work highlights the self-deception and unhealthy mutual dependence that define the trio's relationship. Slimani skillfully captures the daily choreography of cramped domestic life as each character tries to outdo the others and the varying demands placed on oneself. Between Louise and Myriam, this choreography becomes implicitly antagonistic since the former is used as a tool for production, evaluated by her output and level of circumspection. Louise is described as performing "*en coulisses, discrète et puissante" (59), which means she is all-seeing and influencing the action off-stage. Regardless of her "inferior*" status in the home, she has disproportionate control over events. This is similar to the servant in ancient French play. Indeed, Louise's persistent wearing of her "col Claudine" costume, the suffocating "unity of place" all of the primary action takes place there—and the fact that we hardly ever get to see behind the nanny façade make the Massé apartment setting resemble a theatrical production. Myriam occasionally acts like a kid when Louise is around, letting her take charge of the household, avoiding any challenges to her authority, and abdicating responsibility: "*Louise est là, tenant à bout de bras cet édifice fragile*." *Myriam agrees to be a mother (59) as Louise gives birth to Myriam*, who in turn gives birth to the perpetually immature Paul, who in turn "mothers" Louise in the scene where he teaches her to swim; this remarkable image highlights the role-switching among the characters that inhabit this hellish huis clos of dysfunctional denial. Myriam gives up domestic control to Louise, in part. She is grateful to Louise for relieving her of many of the challenges of parenting, partly because she feels socially awkward about hiring a nanny in the first place and partly because she is exhausted from being a working mother. Like any proud mother, Louise also takes pride in the material and professional success her surrogate children, Paul and Myriam, have achieved thanks to her assistance.

Louise's Medea-like unwillingness to give up control over Mila and Adam is the culmination of the subaltern's paradoxical mastery within this relational triangle; in other words, if she cannot have the children, no one else will. She terminates her position by doing the ultimate act of severance between mother and child. "Neonaticide and infanticide do not give death: they are the work of possession," argues Julia Kristeva in "Reliance, or Maternal Eroticism"(Kristeva, 2014). "*Elle voudrait les retenir, s'accrocher à eux, gratter de ses ongles le sol en pierre*." Louise sees the Massé as her ticket to happiness and social acceptance. She wants to pause their life together, freeze the status quo, and trap them in an existential snow globe where they would do the same things repeatedly. She wants to put them under cloche as two fidgety and lustful dancers snatched from the bottom of a music-filled box. (81). In addition to being the ultimate act of possession and expression of her freedom, the murder of the children also represents the most traumatic way to halt their progress and independence, without which she will no longer be employed and needed. It also perfectly captures the ambivalence of mothers, as she "lovingly" runs a bath full of toys before killing them. The texts emphasize that the façade has broken down, and the "real" Louise—one who is full of self-hatred—is exposed by repeating the proper subject noun "*Louise" at the start of a series of actions rather than "la nounou*" (213) and whose auditory hallucinations drive her to murder in an attempt to find some relief.

5. Conclusion

In *Chanson's douce,* Leïla Slimani weaves a compelling narrative that uncovers the complexities of maternal experience within the confines of class disparity and societal expectations. The study demonstrates that Slimani's portrayal of motherhood extends beyond biological ties, encompassing the emotional labour and social alienation of caregiving in a class-stratified society. Through the character of Louise, Slimani illustrates the dehumanizing effects of socioeconomic inequalities, highlighting how caregivers, despite their essential roles, are often marginalized and subject to emotional detachment. Ultimately, Slimani's work challenges traditional definitions of motherhood, revealing the nuanced emotional terrain that mothers and caregivers navigate in contemporary society. This exploration underscores the need for a re-evaluation of caregiving roles, addressing both the psychological toll of alienation and the socioeconomic factors that shape maternal identities.

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Research Article

EXPANSION OF DEPARTMENTAL STORES AND LIVELIHOOD VULNERABILITY: UNDERSTANDING THE CHANGING FORTUNES OF LOCAL SHOPKEEPERS IN KASHMIR

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Abstract
This study examines the varied impacts of departmental stores on local shopkeepers in the urban areas of Kashmir. The proliferation of departmental stores in these regions has raised concerns about their social and economic implications for traditional local retailers who predominantly sell kiryana (groceries) and general merchandise. Through in-depth interviews conducted with 40 shopkeepers, this study investigates the challenges and opportunities faced by local businesses in the wake of the growing presence of departmental stores. The findings reveal a complex interplay of factors influencing the dynamics between departmental stores and local shops. Economic factors such as pricing strategies, inventory management, and consumer preferences emerge as significant determinants of competition. Additionally, social factors, including community ties, customer relationships, and cultural preferences, play a crucial role in shaping the survival strategies adopted by local shopkeepers amid changing market dynamics. This study also explores the adaptation strategies employed by local shopkeepers to remain competitive, encompassing diversification of products, personalized customer service, and leveraging local knowledge and networks. The study further examines the role of government policies and regulatory frameworks in mediating the impact of departmental stores on local businesses. By elucidating the challenges and opportunities arising from the coexistence of departmental stores and local shops, this

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report underscores the importance of fostering inclusive and sustainable growth in the retail sector to support the livelihoods of local communities in Kashmir.

Keywords
Departmental stores, local shopkeepers, *kiryana* shops, adaptation strategies, Kashmir, urban economy

Introduction

The proliferation of departmental stores has significantly reshaped the retail landscape and its socio-economic surroundings. Departmental stores, characterized by their large scale, extensive product range, and one-stop shopping convenience, have become an integral feature of urban life. This transformation, while offering multiple benefits to consumers, has simultaneously generated profound economic and social implications for small, traditional retailers. The entry of large departmental stores often leads to what has been described as retail agglomeration, where clusters of organized retail outlets attract consumers through convenience and scale advantages (Basker, 2005). However, this concentration of retail power can adversely affect small, independent shopkeepers who operate with limited capital and purchasing capacity.

Studies indicate that large retail establishments benefit from economies of scale, enabling them to offer lower prices and broader product assortments compared to small retailers (Artz & Stone, 2006; Basker, 2007). This pricing disparity frequently results in a shift in consumer behavior, as shoppers gravitate toward cost-effective and standardized retail environments. Consequently, local retailers often face shrinking profit margins, declining sales, and, in some cases, business closures. The impact of departmental stores is therefore not confined to competition alone but reflects deeper structural transformations within market economies.

Understanding this shift requires engagement with broader sociological perspectives on consumer behavior. Early economic theories viewed consumers as rational actors seeking utility maximization; however, subsequent sociological analyses have emphasized that consumption is shaped by cultural norms, social relationships, status considerations, and psychological motivations (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2007; Solomon, 2014). Social factors such as reference groups, family influence, and symbolic value attached to certain retail spaces influence shopping preferences (Arnould, Price, & Zinkhan, 2004). Departmental

stores often position themselves as modern, aspirational spaces, thereby shaping consumer identities and reinforcing status-linked consumption patterns.

Markets do not merely respond to consumer behavior; they actively shape and construct consumer needs. Through advertising, branding, and product differentiation strategies, corporations cultivate desires and redefine perceptions of necessity (Keller, 2001; Kapferer & Bastien, 2012). Product innovation and planned obsolescence further generate cycles of demand (Christensen, 1997; Schor, 2004). Promotional techniques, competitive pricing, and experiential retail environments are strategic market responses aimed at attracting and retaining consumers (Kotler & Keller, 2016). In this context, departmental stores represent both a response to and a driver of changing consumption patterns.

Globalization has further accelerated the expansion of organized retail. Increased interconnectedness of markets, technological advancements, and global supply chains have facilitated the diffusion of standardized retail formats across regions (Bordo et al., 2003; Brynjolfsson & Smith, 2000). The emergence of global brands and the convergence of consumer preferences have contributed to the homogenization of retail spaces (Levitt, 1983; Ritzer, 2010). While globalization enhances variety and efficiency, it can simultaneously marginalize localized retail structures and erode traditional commercial practices (Barber, 2007; Stiglitz, 2002).

Beyond economic competition, the expansion of departmental stores carries social consequences. Traditional retailers often function as embedded community institutions, fostering personalized relationships and neighborhood cohesion (Zukin, 1995; 2009). The rise of large-scale, impersonal retailing can weaken these social ties and contribute to the standardization of cultural spaces (Haltiwanger, Jarmin, & Krizan, 2010). From a Marxian perspective, the consolidation of retail power reflects broader capitalist dynamics of accumulation and concentration (Marx, 1867). Commodity fetishism obscures the social relations underlying production, shifting attention to branded commodities and reinforcing consumerist ideologies (Marx, 1867).

At the same time, departmental stores are associated with employment generation, infrastructural growth, and increased tax revenues (Chechani, 2021). Their impact is therefore complex and multidimensional, encompassing both opportunities and disruptions. The coexistence of traditional and modern retail

formats represents an ongoing negotiation between scale-driven efficiency and community-based commerce.

In the specific context of Srinagar and Anantnag in Kashmir, traditional *kiryana* shops and small general merchandise outlets have historically operated through trust-based credit systems, local supply networks, and strong social embeddedness. The growing presence of departmental stores in these urban centres introduces new competitive pressures shaped by pricing strategies, inventory management systems, promotional practices, and changing consumer preferences. Issues such as parking infrastructure, regulatory frameworks, and administrative decisions further mediate the competitive environment faced by local shopkeepers.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to understand the varied economic and social impacts of departmental stores on local shopkeepers in Srinagar and Anantnag. Based on in-depth interviews with 40 shopkeepers, the research examines competitive dynamics, survival strategies, adaptive mechanisms, and perceptions of state policy. By situating local experiences within broader processes of consumer culture transformation, market restructuring, globalization, and capitalist consolidation, the study contributes to sociological debates on retail modernization, informal economies, and livelihood sustainability in contemporary urban contexts.

Review of Literature

Scholarship on organized retail expansion highlights the structural transformation of local markets through processes of retail agglomeration and market consolidation. Studies indicate that large departmental stores benefit from economies of scale, bulk procurement systems, and standardized pricing mechanisms, enabling them to offer competitive prices that small retailers often struggle to match (Basker, 2005; Artz & Stone, 2006). Such consolidation of retail power has frequently been associated with declining sales among traditional shops and intensified competitive pressures within localized markets. However, the transformation of retail landscapes cannot be explained solely through pricing dynamics. Scholars emphasize that consumer behavior is shaped by social, cultural, and psychological influences that extend beyond rational economic calculation (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2007; Solomon, 2014). The appeal of departmental stores is often linked to perceptions of convenience, variety, and modernity, which gradually reshape consumer expectations and everyday shopping practices. As consumption

becomes increasingly associated with aspirational identities and standardized retail environments, traditional shops face not only economic displacement but also symbolic marginalization within changing consumer cultures. Further literature on market behavior suggests that corporations do not merely respond to consumer preferences but actively construct and shape them through advertising, branding, and experiential retail strategies (Keller, 2001; Kapferer & Bastien, 2012). Through product innovation, promotional campaigns, and strategic positioning, organized retail generates continuous cycles of demand, reinforcing its market dominance. In this sense, the growth of departmental stores represents both a response to and a driver of evolving consumption patterns. These transformations are closely linked to broader processes of globalization. The diffusion of standardized retail models across national and regional contexts has been facilitated by technological integration, global supply chains, and cross-border investment flows (Levitt, 1983; Ritzer, 2010). While globalization enhances efficiency and expands consumer choice, it simultaneously intensifies competitive pressures on localized, small-scale enterprises that operate within limited resource frameworks. Beyond economic restructuring, scholars draw attention to the social embeddedness of traditional retail. Small retailers are often deeply integrated within local social networks, providing personalized services, informal credit arrangements, and sustaining community cohesion (Zukin, 1995; 2009). The shift toward impersonal, large-scale retailing raises concerns regarding the weakening of neighborhood ties and the homogenization of urban commercial spaces. In the Indian context, the expansion of departmental stores has been associated with urbanization, rising disposable incomes, and infrastructural development. Empirical studies document mixed outcomes, noting employment generation and modernization on the one hand, alongside significant economic pressures on kirana stores and family-owned enterprises on the other (Chechani, 2021). Although existing literature has extensively examined organized retail expansion at national and global levels, relatively limited research has focused on its localized socio-economic impact in Kashmir. Moreover, few studies integrate economic competition with sociological dimensions such as community embeddedness, shifts in consumer culture, and the role of regulatory mediation. The present study seeks to address this gap by examining the lived experiences of local shopkeepers in Srinagar and Anantnag, thereby contributing context-specific empirical insights to broader debates on retail transformation and livelihood sustainability.

Objectives of the study

In order to systematically examine the changing retail landscape and its implications for traditional livelihood, the present study is guided by the following specific objectives:

- To analyze the socio-economic impact of departmental stores on local shopkeepers in the selected urban areas.
- To examine the extent to which departmental stores have influenced sales revenue, profitability, and the long-term sustainability of local retail enterprises.
- To investigate the perceptions, challenges, and adaptive strategies adopted by local shopkeepers in response to increasing competitive pressures from departmental stores.

Universe of the study

The universe of the present study comprises local shopkeepers operating in the urban areas of Srinagar and Anantnag, Kashmir. These respondents primarily manage *kiryana* (grocery) and general merchandise stores. The study is specifically confined to shopkeepers whose establishments are located within a 150-meter radius of nine selected departmental stores. This spatial delimitation has been adopted to ensure that the participants are directly exposed to the competitive presence of departmental stores and are therefore well positioned to provide informed and experience-based insights relevant to the objectives of the study.

Sampling

The study employed a purposive sampling strategy to ensure the selection of respondents who were directly relevant to the research objectives. Given the specific focus on the impact of departmental stores, only those local shopkeepers whose businesses were situated within a 150-meter radius of nine identified departmental stores in Srinagar and Anantnag were considered eligible for inclusion. This spatial criterion was deliberately adopted to ensure that respondents had direct and sustained exposure to organized retail competition. Purposive sampling was considered appropriate because the study sought depth of insight rather than statistical generalization. The objective was to engage with shopkeepers who were experiencing tangible economic and social effects resulting from the proximity of departmental stores. By concentrating on a clearly defined geographic zone of competitive interaction, the research ensured contextual specificity and analytical relevance. A total of 40 shopkeepers were selected across the identified locations. Care was taken to include variation in terms of shop

size, years of operation, product range, and customer base in order to capture diverse experiences within the local retail ecosystem. Both long-established family-run *kiryana* stores and relatively newer small enterprises were included to understand generational and structural differences in adaptation. The sampling process was iterative in nature. Initial interactions helped identify suitable participants, and subsequent selections were guided by emerging patterns and thematic relevance. This approach enabled the researcher to reach a point of thematic saturation, where additional interviews were yielding recurring insights rather than substantially new information. By combining spatial delimitation with purposive selection and attention to diversity, the sampling design ensured that the study remained focused, contextually grounded, and methodologically coherent.

Data collection

The study primarily relied on qualitative methods of data collection to capture the nuanced economic and socio-cultural experiences of local shopkeepers. In-depth, semi-structured interviews constituted the principal tool of inquiry. The interview guide was carefully designed to elicit detailed narratives regarding changes in sales patterns, profitability, customer behavior, competitive pressures, and adaptive strategies. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility, enabling respondents to elaborate on their lived experiences while ensuring alignment with the objectives of the study. Given the linguistic context of the research setting, interviews were conducted primarily in Urdu and Kashmiri, depending on the comfort and preference of the respondents. This approach facilitated open communication and minimized barriers that might arise from language constraints. Where necessary, responses were translated into English during transcription and analysis, with careful attention to preserving contextual meanings, idiomatic expressions, and culturally embedded nuances. Efforts were made to ensure that translation did not dilute the interpretive richness of the original responses. Consideration was also given to the working schedules and business routines of shopkeepers. Interviews were conducted at times convenient to respondents, often during relatively less busy hours, so as not to disrupt their commercial activities. This sensitivity to respondents' time constraints not only ensured ethical engagement but also fostered trust and rapport, thereby enhancing the quality and depth of responses. In addition to interviews, non-participant observation formed an important supplementary technique. The researcher spent extended periods

seated outside local shops as well as departmental stores to observe customer footfall, interaction patterns, and comparative flow dynamics. These observations enabled a contextual understanding of spatial proximity, consumer movement, peak hours, and visible differences in shopping behavior. Observational insights were systematically recorded in field notes and later triangulated with interview data to strengthen interpretive validity. The combination of language-sensitive interviewing, time-conscious engagement, and structured field observation ensured a comprehensive and contextually grounded data collection process.

Findings of the study

Demographic profile of the respondents: The demographic profile of the respondents provides an essential background for understanding the socio-economic context within which the impact of departmental stores is experienced. The study included a total of 40 respondents, all of whom were male shopkeepers operating general merchandise and *kiryana* (grocery) stores in the urban areas of Srinagar and Anantnag. The absence of female respondents reflects the prevailing gendered structure of small-scale retail trade in the selected areas, where shop ownership and management are predominantly male-driven. In terms of age distribution, respondents were categorized into three groups. Nine respondents fell within the 20–30 years age bracket, sixteen were between 31–45 years, and fifteen were above 45 years. This distribution indicates that the retail sector in these urban localities comprises both relatively young entrepreneurs and long-established shopkeepers. A significant proportion of respondents belonged to the middle-aged and older categories, suggesting continuity of family-based retail practices and accumulated market experience over time. Geographically, the respondents were distributed across two primary locations: 23 shopkeepers were based in Srinagar and 17 in Anantnag. This regional spread allowed for capturing variations within urban retail environments while maintaining a focused comparison between the two districts. An examination of economic background reveals that most shops were family-operated enterprises. In several cases, businesses had been previously managed by fathers or uncles before being taken over by the current respondents. Assistance from brothers, fathers, and other family members was common in day-to-day operations, underscoring the embedded nature of these enterprises within family structures. Such intergenerational continuity reflects the traditional character of local retail trade in the region.With regard to earnings, monthly incomes for most

shopkeepers ranged between ₹20,000 to ₹30,000, with some reporting earnings between ₹40,000 and ₹50,000, and one respondent indicating earnings as high as ₹100,000 per month. These figures suggest considerable variation in business scale and customer base among respondents. The primary expenditures reported by shopkeepers included healthcare expenses, education of children, and procurement of goods for resale. These expense patterns indicate that shop income plays a crucial role not only in sustaining business operations but also in meeting essential household needs. Overall, the demographic characteristics of the respondents reveal a retail sector rooted in family ownership, moderate income levels, and long-term engagement with local markets. This socio-economic positioning provides the foundation for understanding how departmental stores affect not merely commercial activity but also livelihood security and household stability in the studied areas.

Impact of Departmental Stores: The presence of departmental stores in close proximity to traditional retail shops has produced noticeable changes in the local commercial landscape. A substantial majority of respondents reported experiencing shifts in their customer base following the establishment of departmental stores nearby. Out of the 40 shopkeepers interviewed, 37 indicated that they had observed a change in customer patterns, while only three respondents reported no significant alteration. This overwhelming response suggests that the expansion of organized retail has had a visible and immediate influence on neighborhood-level commerce.

When asked to describe the nature of this change, respondents highlighted two primary patterns. A large proportion reported a decline in customer footfall, attributing this reduction to the convenience, product variety, and organized environment offered by departmental stores. Others noted a demographic shift in their clientele, particularly observing that younger customers and relatively more affluent consumers increasingly preferred shopping at departmental outlets. These responses indicate that competition is not only quantitative, in terms of reduced numbers of customers, but also qualitative, involving shifts in consumer preferences and expectations. The impact on sales emerged as one of the most significant consequences reported by respondents. A majority confirmed that their sales had been adversely affected since the opening of departmental stores in the vicinity. Only a small fraction stated that their sales remained stable. Among those reporting a decline, the extent of impact varied. Some

shopkeepers described moderate reductions in monthly sales, while others reported substantial decreases that significantly affected their overall revenue. For several respondents, the reduction in income was not merely a temporary fluctuation but an ongoing concern influencing their long-term business sustainability. In explaining the reasons behind this impact, shopkeepers identified multiple factors. One of the most frequently mentioned concerns was limited physical space. Compared to departmental stores, local shops operate within confined premises, restricting their ability to display a wide range of products or create an attractive shopping environment. Customers, according to respondents, are drawn toward larger stores where they can access diverse products under one roof, often at competitive prices. The self-service model, organized shelving, and perceived efficiency of departmental stores were also cited as influential factors in shaping consumer preference. Customer satisfaction was repeatedly mentioned as a critical element. Respondents observed that departmental stores provide an environment that many consumers perceive as modern, convenient, and reliable. This perception contributes to shifting loyalty patterns, where customers who once relied on local shops for daily purchases now diversify their shopping behavior. In some cases, traditional shopkeepers felt that customers preferred the standardized pricing and packaging practices of departmental outlets, even when price differences were minimal. At the same time, a small number of respondents expressed resilience, suggesting that their businesses remained stable due to long-standing customer loyalty. These shopkeepers emphasized personal relationships, trust-based credit facilities, and familiarity as factors that helped retain a core group of customers despite increased competition. Overall, the findings reveal that the impact of departmental stores extends beyond simple price competition. It encompasses changes in consumer behavior, perceptions of quality and convenience, and evolving expectations regarding shopping experiences. For most local shopkeepers, the presence of departmental stores represents a structural shift in the retail environment, one that requires adaptation, strategic adjustment, and continuous negotiation to sustain their livelihoods.

Economic Impact: The economic consequences of the emergence of departmental stores were strongly articulated by the respondents. A considerable number of shopkeepers reported that their profitability had declined after the establishment of departmental stores within close proximity to their shops. While

some described the reduction as gradual, others emphasized that the impact was immediate and noticeable in their daily sales records. Many respondents stated that before the arrival of departmental stores, their sales were relatively stable and predictable. However, after organized retail outlets began operating in the area, fluctuations in daily income became more frequent. Several shopkeepers estimated that their monthly earnings had reduced by amounts ranging from ₹5,000 to ₹15,000. For small-scale retailers operating on limited margins, such reductions were described as significant and burdensome. The decline in profitability was attributed to multiple interconnected factors. One major concern was price competition. Respondents observed that departmental stores often offered discounts, promotional schemes, and competitive pricing strategies that local shopkeepers found difficult to match. Due to bulk purchasing and larger capital reserves, departmental stores were perceived as capable of sustaining lower margins while maintaining overall profitability. In contrast, local retailers depend on smaller procurement cycles and limited stock capacity, which restrict their ability to reduce prices without affecting their own earnings. Another economic challenge reported was the reduction in bulk purchases by regular customers. Shopkeepers noted that customers increasingly preferred to purchase monthly or weekly household supplies from departmental stores, leaving local shops primarily for urgent or small-quantity purchases. This shift in purchasing behavior has reduced the volume of sales and, consequently, overall revenue generation for traditional retailers. For some respondents, the impact extended beyond sales decline to concerns about long-term business sustainability. A few expressed apprehensions about whether their shops would remain viable in the coming years if the trend continued. The fear was not merely about immediate income loss but about gradual erosion of customer loyalty and shrinking market presence. In cases where shops served as the primary source of household income, reduced earnings directly affected family expenditure patterns, including education and healthcare expenses. At the same time, it is important to note that not all respondents experienced severe economic disruption. A small segment reported relatively stable earnings, attributing this to strong customer relationships, provision of credit facilities, and long-standing presence in the locality. These shopkeepers believed that trust and familiarity continued to provide them with a degree of economic security despite competitive pressures. Overall, the economic impact of departmental stores on local shopkeepers emerges as uneven but

substantial. While some businesses demonstrate resilience, the majority report reduced profitability, altered purchasing patterns, and growing uncertainty regarding future sustainability. The findings suggest that organized retail expansion has restructured the local economic environment in ways that disproportionately affect small-scale, family-operated enterprises.

Social Impact: Beyond its economic implications, the expansion of departmental stores has produced noticeable social effects within the local retail ecosystem. Traditional *kiryana* and general merchandise shops in Srinagar and Anantnag have historically functioned not only as sites of economic exchange but also as spaces of social interaction. Shopkeepers often maintained close, informal relationships with their customers, many of whom belonged to the same locality and had long-standing associations with the shop. Several respondents observed that the establishment of departmental stores has altered patterns of customer interaction. Where earlier customers would frequently visit local shops, engage in casual conversation, and purchase goods on a daily basis, there is now a visible shift toward less frequent and more transactional engagements. Some shopkeepers remarked that interactions have become more limited and less personal, as customers increasingly divide their purchases between departmental stores and neighborhood shops. The weakening of traditional customer loyalty emerged as a recurring theme. Respondents expressed that while older customers continue to maintain relationships based on familiarity and trust, younger consumers tend to prefer the modern shopping environment offered by departmental stores. This generational difference in shopping preference was perceived as gradually reshaping community-based commercial ties. For many shopkeepers, the change was not merely about losing customers but about losing a sense of relational continuity that had characterized their business for years. Credit facilities, which traditionally strengthened social bonds between shopkeepers and customers, were also affected. Some respondents indicated that customers who previously relied on informal credit arrangements now prefer cash or digital transactions at departmental outlets. This shift has implications not only for business operations but also for mutual trust and interdependence within neighborhoods. At the same time, respondents did not uniformly portray departmental stores as socially disruptive. A few acknowledged that organized retail provides convenience and comfort, especially for families seeking a wide range of products in a single visit.

However, even among those who recognized these benefits, there remained a sense that the social character of local commerce was undergoing transformation. Overall, the findings suggest that the impact of departmental stores extends beyond measurable economic indicators to subtle but significant changes in social relationships. Traditional shops, once embedded within everyday neighborhood life, are increasingly operating in a more competitive and less relational environment. The transformation reflects a broader shift from personalized, community-based commerce toward standardized and impersonal retail practices, with implications for social cohesion at the local level.

Impact on Living Conditions: The economic changes experienced by local shopkeepers have had direct and indirect implications for their living conditions. For many respondents, the shop constitutes the primary or sole source of household income. Consequently, fluctuations in sales and profitability translate immediately into changes in household expenditure patterns, savings capacity, and overall financial stability. A significant number of respondents indicated that reduced earnings have affected their ability to comfortably manage essential expenses such as children's education, healthcare, and household consumption. While most shopkeepers continue to sustain their businesses, several expressed concern that declining income margins limit their capacity to plan for future contingencies. In households where income was already modest, even a reduction of a few thousand rupees per month was described as substantial. Some respondents conveyed a sense of growing financial insecurity. Although none reported immediate closure of their shops, there was an underlying apprehension about the long-term viability of their enterprises. The uncertainty surrounding future income stability has led some shopkeepers to reconsider expansion plans, postpone renovations, or limit reinvestment in stock. This cautious economic behavior reflects a broader perception of vulnerability within the changing retail environment. The impact was also evident at the level of psychological well-being. A few respondents acknowledged experiencing stress and anxiety related to declining customer numbers and unpredictable earnings. The competitive presence of departmental stores was perceived not merely as market competition but as a persistent pressure that influences daily business confidence. For shopkeepers who inherited their establishments from previous generations, the possibility of diminished sustainability carries emotional weight, as it affects both economic continuity and

family legacy. At the same time, resilience was visible among several participants. Some emphasized their determination to sustain their shops despite challenges, drawing strength from established customer relationships and community familiarity. Others expressed hope that local customers would continue to support neighborhood businesses out of loyalty and convenience. Overall, the findings indicate that the impact of departmental stores extends beyond commercial metrics into the domain of livelihood security and household well-being. While the effects vary in intensity, the general trend suggests increasing economic uncertainty and cautious adaptation among local shopkeepers. The transformation of the retail environment thus has tangible implications for everyday living conditions, financial planning, and perceptions of future stability in the studied areas.

Conclusion

The rise of departmental stores has introduced a series of challenges for traditional local shopkeepers, which are deeply examined in this dissertation. One of the primary insights from this study is the intense competition that local shops face from these larger retail entities. Departmental stores, with their extensive range of products, competitive pricing, and convenient shopping experience, have increasingly attracted customers away from local shops. This shift has resulted in diminished sales and reduced profitability for traditional vendors, who struggle to maintain their market share in an evolving retail landscape. The empirical findings demonstrate that this competition is not limited to pricing alone but is multidimensional in nature. Changes in customer footfall, shifting purchasing patterns, and the growing preference for organized retail environments collectively contribute to declining revenues among local shopkeepers. Many respondents reported noticeable reductions in monthly income, which directly affect household expenditure, savings, and reinvestment capacity. Thus, the expansion of departmental stores has implications that extend beyond commercial rivalry into questions of livelihood security and long-term business sustainability.

The research further reveals a significant disparity in infrastructure between local shops and departmental stores. Departmental stores typically feature spacious layouts, modern amenities, organized product displays, and ample parking facilities, which enhance the overall shopping experience and attract a substantial customer base. In contrast, local shops often operate within constrained spaces and lack adequate parking arrangements, limiting both accessibility and customer

convenience. This infrastructural inequity not only shapes consumer preference but also restricts the competitive capacity and growth potential of small-scale retailers. Field observations conducted during the study corroborate these findings. The visible difference in customer flow between departmental stores and adjacent local shops highlights the role of spatial organization and physical environment in influencing consumer behavior. Shopkeepers frequently emphasized that limited display space and congestion reduce their ability to compete effectively, even when product quality and pricing remain comparable. Addressing these challenges is crucial for ensuring the sustainability of traditional retail businesses. The findings underscore the need for proactive measures by government and local authorities to create a more equitable retail environment. Implementing policies to provide designated parking spaces for local shops, as exemplified by the Sonwar area initiative mentioned by respondents, could significantly improve accessibility and potentially enhance sales. Supporting infrastructure upgrades, facilitating modest expansions, and improving storefront visibility would enable local vendors to better showcase their products and enhance the shopping experience. At the same time, the study does not suggest the exclusion or restriction of departmental stores. Rather, it highlights the necessity of a balanced approach to retail development that recognizes the coexistence of both traditional and organized formats. A policy framework that acknowledges the socio-economic embeddedness of local shops—particularly their role in sustaining household incomes and neighborhood networks—can contribute to more inclusive growth. This dissertation therefore emphasizes that retail transformation in Srinagar and Anantnag is not merely a matter of modernization but of structural adjustment with social consequences. By addressing infrastructural disparities and fostering a supportive regulatory environment, the administration can promote economic resilience while preserving the diversity of community-based commerce in Kashmir. Strategic and context-sensitive interventions are essential to ensure that local shopkeepers are not displaced by market concentration but are instead supported in adapting to shifting retail dynamics. Such an approach would contribute to a more sustainable and socially balanced retail ecosystem.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

To address the challenges faced by traditional local shopkeepers in the context of increasing competition from departmental stores, a following set of context-sensitive interventions may be considered:

Infrastructural enhancement around local shops is critical. The findings of the study indicate that disparities in physical space, layout, and parking significantly influence consumer preference. Investments in designated parking spaces, improved storefront design, and better spatial organization can substantially improve accessibility and customer experience. Local authorities may prioritize modest infrastructural upgrades in commercial clusters where small retailers operate in close proximity to departmental stores. Such measures would not eliminate competition but could reduce structural disadvantages faced by local vendors.

Financial assistance mechanisms may strengthen the adaptive capacity of small retailers. Government-supported grants, subsidized credit schemes, or temporary tax relief could enable shopkeepers to undertake necessary renovations, modernize storage and display systems, and adopt digital payment technologies. Given that many respondents reported constrained profit margins, even limited financial support could enhance their ability to compete more effectively.

Collective and collaborative strategies among local shopkeepers deserve consideration. Encouraging joint promotions, coordinated discount periods, and community-based commercial events may improve visibility and reinforce neighborhood-level commercial solidarity. Training programs focused on digital literacy, inventory management, and basic e-commerce practices could further empower shopkeepers to respond to changing consumer behavior.

Institutional dialogue between local business associations and administrative authorities is essential. Structured engagement platforms can help policymakers better understand ground-level challenges and design targeted, evidence-based interventions. Regular consultation mechanisms would allow retail policies to reflect local realities rather than being shaped solely by macro-level economic considerations.

Strengthening customer retention mechanisms may provide local shops with a competitive advantage rooted in relational capital. Loyalty programs, personalized services, and flexible credit arrangements can reinforce trust-based relationships that departmental stores may not easily replicate. Such measures build upon the social embeddedness that characterizes traditional retail structures in Srinagar and Anantnag.

Taken together, these strategies aim not to restrict organized retail expansion but to promote a balanced and inclusive retail

ecosystem. A calibrated policy approach that supports infrastructural parity, financial resilience, and adaptive capacity can enable traditional shops and departmental stores to coexist. Ensuring such balance is essential for preserving livelihood security, sustaining community-based commerce, and maintaining the socio-economic diversity of urban Kashmir.

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