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Founder
S. S. Shashi

Chief Editor
Dharam Vir

Volume 34, Number 1 (January-March), 2025



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**(Autonomous, Regd. Recognized Charitable Organization of
Social Scientists, Authors, Journalists & Social Activists)**

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Contents

1. The Gender Divide in Higher Education: Analyzing Subject Selection and Stereotypes through Concurrent Design	<i>Dil Bahadur Gurung</i>	1
2. The Confucius Institute and Cross-Cultural Communication Approach to Soft Power in Nepal	<i>Dipak Devkota, Dai, Yonghong, Zeyar Oo, Ashok Poudel, Lok Bahadur BK</i>	14
3. Tax Evasion and Revenue Leakage in Nepal: Historical Perspective	<i>Dipesh Kumar Ghimire</i>	31
4. Ethnicity, Marriage and Marital Status in Nepal	<i>Tika Ram Gautam</i>	46
5. Reshaping Governance Ethics in India: The Need for Reform	<i>Manoj Kumar, Abhay Vikram Singh & Dinesh Vyas</i>	70
6. Empowering Women through Community Mobilization in Saving & Credit Group	<i>Nirmal Bhandari</i>	85
7. Socio-demographic Factors affecting Skilled Birth Attendance Utilization in Koshi Province, Nepal	<i>Bijaya Mani Devkota & Arjun K.C.</i>	97
8. Picturesque Journey in Mimicry: Nature Culture Resemblance in Dorothy Wordsworth's <i>Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland</i>	<i>Mani Bhadra Gautam</i>	113
9. Nepal's Ethnic Struggles: From History to Political Assertion	<i>Keshab Raj Silwal</i>	126
10. Evolution of Languages & Dialects in India Over the Ages: A Perspective	<i>Jyotika Elhance & Swati Ranjan Choudhary</i>	143
11. Exploring Approaches to Environmental Challenges: India and Sub-Saharan Africa	<i>Prakash Veer Dahiya</i>	155
12. Ensuring No One is Left Behind: A Sociological Inquiry into the Intersectional Impediments to Dalit Women Accessing Higher Education in India	<i>K. Gulam Dasthagir, Nerella Archana & Anbu Kavitha</i>	169
13. Fate vs Free Will in Sophocles' Oedipus & Antigone	<i>Jyotika Elhance</i>	194
14. Exploring India's Maritime Foreign Policy in Southeast Asia: The SAGAR Initiative	<i>Pintu Kumar & Prakash Veer Dahiya</i>	205

Journal of National Development

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The Journal of National Development (JND) is an interdisciplinary bi-annual peer reviewed & refereed international journal committed to the ideals of a 'world community' and 'universal brotherhood'. The Journal is a joint effort of like-minded scholars in the field of social research. Its specific aims are to identify, to understand and to help the process of nation-building within the framework of a 'world community' and enhance research across the social sciences (Sociology, Anthropology, Political Science, Psychology, History, Geography, Education, Economics, Law, Communication, Linguistics) and related disciplines like all streams of Home Science, Management, Computer Science, Commerce as well as others like Food Technology, Agricultural Technology, Information Technology, Environmental Science, Dairy Science etc. having social focus/implications. It focuses on issues that are global and on local problems and policies that have international implications. By providing a forum for discussion on important issues with a global perspective, the *JND* is a part of unfolding world wide struggle for establishing a just and peaceful world order. Thus, the *JND* becomes a point of confluence for the rivulets from various disciplines to form a mighty mainstream gushing towards the formulation and propagation of a humanistic world-view.

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The Gender Divide in Higher Education: Analyzing Subject Selection and Stereotypes through Concurrent Design

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Abstract

This study examines the gendered trends in subject selection in Nepal's educational system, focusing on how societal stereotypes influence students' choices. Historically, Nepalese education has been shaped by gender norms, with males directed toward technical and professional fields like engineering and medicine, while females are encouraged to pursue humanities and education. Despite government efforts to promote gender equality, deeply ingrained biases persist, particularly in rural areas, limiting opportunities for women in male-dominated fields. The research highlights that families, schools, and universities often reinforce these norms, with teachers and counselors subtly guiding students toward gender-conforming choices. The study also explores the impact of earning potential and work-life balance on subject selection, noting that men are more likely to pursue high-paying fields, while women often opt for careers offering better work-life balance. Additionally, the lack of female role models in technical fields discourages women from entering STEM disciplines. The findings underscore the need for initiatives that challenge traditional gender roles and provide equal opportunities for both genders to pursue diverse educational paths.

Keywords

Gendered curriculum, Subject selection, Educational stereotype, Influence.

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1

The Gender Divide in Higher Education: Analyzing Subject Selection and Stereotypes through Concurrent Design

1. Introduction

Choosing a subject is a challenging task since it is closely tied to the career paths students are likely to pursue in the future. At the undergraduate level, gender perceptions often play a significant role in this decision-making process, mirroring broader societal norms and expectations. These gender roles and stereotypes influence educational trajectories, shaping both academic and professional choices.

Subjects are frequently classified as “masculine” or “feminine” according to gender standards. For instance, the humanities, arts, and caregiving-related subjects are perceived as feminine fields, whereas STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields are frequently linked to masculinity (Francis, 2002). As a result, preconceptions that these subjects are “too tough” or “technical” may deter women from pursuing careers in computer science or engineering. On the other side, men who choose “nurturing” or “soft” careers, like teaching or nursing, could face stigma.

In the United Kingdom, the Equal Opportunities Commission (2007) asserts that girls continuously surpass boys in academic performance across all school levels. This does not, however, always help women land well-paying positions. Gender stereotyping, which holds that boys and girls have distinct educational and vocational aptitudes, is one reason they propose for the discrepancy between achievement and occupation.

Traditional gender roles are also frequently portrayed in educational materials, with women in domestic or submissive roles and men as leaders or adventurers. For instance, textbooks may under-represent the contributions of women while highlighting the accomplishments of men in politics and science (Sadker & Zittleman, 2009). Further, gendered language in textbooks and classrooms can subtly reinforce inequalities. For instance, using male-centric terms

like “mankind” or defaulting to masculine pronouns (Skelton & Francis, 2009). Beyond the formal syllabus as well, the “hidden curriculum” perpetuates gender norms through interactions, expectations, and school culture. This includes teacher expectations, division of labor in classroom tasks, and reinforcement of stereotypical behaviors (Connell, 2009).

During agricultural-based societies, education was less valued however, after the emergence of industrial society, education became an integral part of human. The socializing responsibilities of family also shifted from family members to educational institutions. Due to this, education is now becoming a vital part of an economic life. In the meantime, for many, choosing the right subject is challenging as curricula are mostly dominated by men, ignoring the contributions of women to movements, conflicts, and nation-building (Kelly, 1986).

2. Subject Choice Trend in Nepal

The educational decisions of children in Nepalese households are significantly shaped by their parents’ goals. Instead of focusing on career progression, many families see education for girls as a way to improve their chances of marriage. As a result, females might not be allowed to pursue professions like mechanical engineering or construction management that are considered “unsuitable” for women (Gurung & Bista, 2021). Deeply ingrained prejudices still exist despite the Nepalese government’s efforts to advance gender equality through programs like the “Education for All” project and scholarships. Male students predominate in technical professions even in higher education (Karki *et al.*, 2019), while female students are over-represented in faculties of education and the arts. This illustrates that national educational programs are biased against female.

In Nepal, societal preconceptions have significant impact on subject selection. Males are encouraged to seek professions and technological fields that are seen as profitable and prominent, like engineering, computer technology, and medicine. By contrast, women are frequently directed into fields such as education, the humanities, or the social sciences, which correspond with conventional norms regarding nurturing and caregiving (Sharma, 2020). Peers, families, and even schools all serve to further reinforce these views.

Adhikari (2022) argues that such gendered segregation of subjects has contributed to the wage gap, occupational segregation, and under-representation of women in leadership roles in technical industries. In fact these outcomes not only limit personal growth but also constrain the nation's ability to harness its full human resource potential. Nonetheless, in the recent years, there are some progress in breaking these stereotypes, particularly in urban areas. Campaigns promoting STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) education for girls, such as "Girls in STEM Nepal", are encouraging young women to challenge traditional norms (Pant, 2021). This trend shows shifting perceptions of people in terms of female and subject selection. However, these initiatives face resistance in rural areas, where cultural and logistical barriers remain significant.

3. Factors Affecting Subject Selection

Students' choices of subjects can be influenced by various factors, including socialization, institutional practices, and perceived earning potential. Universities, schools, and families all contribute significantly to perpetuating these ideas. Students may be unintentionally led toward gender-conforming decisions by teachers and counselors (Sadker & Zittleman, 2009). Similarly, women are often discouraged from studying male-dominated disciplines like mechanical engineering or physics due to a lack of visible female role models in these fields. In a similar vein, the dominance of women in professions like social work or literature can make men feel excluded (Blickenstaff, 2005).

Another significant factor is perceived earning potential. Women may prioritize work-life balance and choose professions like teaching or healthcare, whereas men are frequently urged to pursue high-paying industries like technology or finance (Charles & Bradley, 2009). Gendered socialization can also impact students' self-confidence. Research shows that even when women perform on par with or better than their male classmates in math and science, they are less likely to believe in their competence in these subjects (Eccles, 1994).

Neo-Marxist perspectives add another dimension to this discussion, emphasizing the role of employers in shaping subject preferences. Employers may prefer male employees who are

perceived as more capable of working extra hours to increase profits. This bias often reflects poorly on women, undermining their achievements in education and reinforcing gender disparities back in schools and universities.

Preliminary surveys have echoed these patterns. For instance, findings similar to Blickenstaff's observations show that male students feel overwhelmed by the predominance of female students in at least five consecutive batches in the Social Work stream. This raises questions about the factors leading female students to enroll in humanities, often labeled as "female subjects". To explore these dynamics, this study has been conducted, and based on the above literature, the following alternative research hypotheses have been formed:

H_{1A}: There is relationship between Teacher's suggestion and subject selected in undergrad level.

H_{2A}: There is association between Parent's suggestion and subject selected in undergrad level.

H_{3A}: There is association between peer's influences and subject selected in undergrad level.

4. Methods

This study employs a concurrent research design to examine the perspectives of undergraduate students from three distinct academic disciplines: Science, Humanities and Social Sciences, and Management. Data collection was carried out through a Google survey, distributed to students enrolled in undergraduate programs across three colleges within the Kathmandu Valley.

The research targeted a total population of 368 undergraduate students from the aforementioned disciplines. Email addresses for these students were obtained from the respective departments, and the survey link was disseminated to all individuals in the population. Of the total population, 68 students, representing the three disciplines, responded to the survey, thus constituting the study's sample.

The survey instrument comprised both closed-ended and open-ended questions, enabling the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. While the responses yield valuable insights, the study recognizes certain limitations. The small sample size, confined to a specific geographic area (Kathmandu Valley), may not fully

reflect the diversity of students from other regions of Nepal. Furthermore, the voluntary nature of participation may result in a sample that is not representative of the broader social and economic demographics of the student population.

5. Findings

5.1 Gender Composition and Schooling Background

Among the respondents, 21 were male and the remaining 47 were female. All the students have graduated their higher school from private schools in Kathmandu. The respondents were asked about their proficiency in Social Studies, nearly 37% responded that they were average and about 47% said they were good in Social Studies until 12th grade. Similarly, their response in Science subjects found 37% were good, 33% were average and 20% were very good. This shows that the students were good both at Social Studies and Science subjects at grade 11 and 12. Nonetheless, more than 50% of students selected social science in the Bachelor's level.

Table-1: Frequency of Students from Undergrad Level

Faculty	Frequency	Percent
Science	17	25
Humanities and Social Science	38	55.9
Management	13	19.1
Total	68	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2024.

From Table-1, it is evident that out of total 68 students responded, more than half were from humanities and social science faculty followed by science and management faculty.

Gender composition in different subjects in plus two and undergrad level is shown in the Table-2 on the next page. Data in this table distinctly show that there were high number of female studying in science following social science and Management subject in Plus Two level. However, in undergrad level, the number of female students studying science, shifted to social science abruptly. On the other hand, the subject selection by male found no change in undergraduate level. Nonetheless, the fluctuating numerical among female students raise question in terms of influence or their personal choice for subject selection in undergraduate level.

Table-2: Gender Composition in Different Subjects in Plus Two and Undergrad Level

Gender	Subject selection in Plus Two Level			Total
	Science	H & Social Science	Management	
Male	10	6	4	20
Female	27	12	9	48
Total	37	18	13	68
Gender	Subject selection in Under Graduate Level			Total
	Science	H & Social Science	Management	
Male	10	6	4	20
Female	7	32	9	48
Total	17	38	13	68

Source: Field Survey, 2024.

One of the female respondent replied why she joined social science is that, *"I am interested in Psychology and helping people. I find it fascinating and want to make a career out of it in future"*. (Female Respondent 47). Similarly, Respondent 24 writes that *"Psychology is very interesting subject and social work as well. Both subjects were highly effective in enhancing individual's personality I took these subjects as major subjects in bachelors"*. (Female Respondent 24). Both the respondent seems more attracted toward social science subjects especially toward psychology and social work so they chose social science in under graduate level. Nonetheless, Respondent 19 believes that she landed in social science in under graduate level because her report in Plus Two was not good. According to her, *"I couldn't do well in Physics in Plus Two but I always had Psychology in my mind so immediately after Plus Two, I joined Psychology in under graduate level"*. (Female Respondent 19).

On the other hand, one of the male respondents (Male Respondent 31) who remained constant in subject selection in undergraduate level writes that *"Science is my passion. The return on studying science is more than any other subjects. Further, I can change my subjects to social science in the future, if I wish to go on it"*. This statement also demonstrates the domination of science among Nepalese academics and male's preference in high return subjects.

5.2 Teacher's Suggestion and Subject Selection

When choosing their bachelor's degree subjects, students might greatly benefit from the advice of their teachers. Teachers can effectively advise pupils since they have a thorough understanding of academic programs and professional pathways. Their observations aid in matching students' interests and strong points with appropriate courses, guaranteeing well-informed and customized decisions. Furthermore, teacher recommendations can expand students' perspectives by addressing their questions and exposing them to less well-known subjects (Smith & Jones, 2021).

Table-3: Teacher's Suggestion for Undergrad Level

Teacher's suggestion for specific subject			Total
Science	H & Social Science	Management	
32	23	13	68

Source: Field Survey, 2024.

Table-4: Chi-Square Tests of Teacher's Suggestion and Subject selection

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	.434a	2	.805
Likelihood Ratio	.436	2	.804
Linear-by-Linear Association	.316	1	.574
N of Valid Cases	68		
a. 1 cells (16.7%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 4.59.			

Source: Field Survey, 2024.

The above table shows that teachers had suggested their students for subject selection in undergraduate level. These suggestion were mostly in science. However, Table-2 showed that the students didn't follow teacher's suggestions for specific subject. Although 32 students were suggested for science subject, only 17 students enrolled in science in undergraduate level. The number of students who selected social science in undergraduate level is higher than the number of students who were suggested for social science (23) by their teacher.

Statistically as well, there is no association between teacher's suggestion and subject selected in undergraduate level (see Table-4).

The Pearson Chi-Square value (0.434) demonstrates that it is not significant as P-value (0.805) is way too larger than significance value (0.05). In this case, the first null hypothesis is failed to reject which means there is no association between Teacher's suggestion and Subject selection in undergraduate level.

5.3 Parents' Subject Suggestion and its Effect

Parents' preference has also led it found that nearly 70% of parents of the respondent's preferences were Science and nearly 20 % preferred social science in Plus 2 or A level.

Table-5: Parent's Subject Suggestion and Subject Selection in Undergrad Level

Stream	Subject suggested by Parents	Subjects selected by the Students in Undergrad level
Science	46	17
Humanities and Social Science	18	38
Management	4	13
Total	68	68

Source: Field Survey, 2024.

Table-6: Chi-Square Test of Parent's Subject Suggestion and Subject Selected by Students in Undergraduate level

Test	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	1.431a	4	.839
Likelihood Ratio	1.509	4	.825
Linear-by-Linear Association	.021	1	.886
N of Valid Cases	68		
a. 5 cells (55.6%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .76.			

Source: Field Survey, 2024.

Further, Table-5 shows that maximum students were suggested for science by their parents followed by social science and management in undergraduate level. However, the subject selected by the students in graduate level tells the different story. The Chi-Square Test for association between parent's suggestion for subject and actual subject selected by the students (see Table-6) is in

line with Table-5. The Pearson Chi-Square value (1.431) is not significant as P-value (0.839) is way too larger than significance value (0.05) which fails to reject the null hypothesis. That means there is no association between the parent's suggestion for their children in undergraduate level and the actual subject selected by the students.

5.4 Peer's Influence to Subject Selection

One of the respondent students studied Science in Plus-two level but selected social science (psychology) in undergraduate level. She responded, *"I have to get inside the clinical psychology field in later years so I choose social science (psychology) in undergraduate level"*. This shows her intention in the future and for that psychology remained her only option. However, in a query about why she is in social science at the Bachelor's level, she responded, *"First off my friend suggested me this and I did well throughout the two years in plus-two as well, so I have joined Bachelor's in Arts for developing my critical thinking and understanding myself better"* (Female Respondent 1). This response indicates unsatisfactory results in science subjects can lead students towards humanities and social science subjects at the Bachelor's level. In addition, peer's suggestion also plays an important role to select social science subject in university level.

To test if there is any association between peer's influences in subject selection in undergrad level, a Chi-Square test is conducted with the same data set.

Table-7: Chi-Square Test of Peer's Influence in subject selection in Undergrad Level

Test	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	8.527a	2	.014
Likelihood Ratio	8.714	2	.013
Linear-by-Linear Association	.596	1	.440
N of Valid Cases	68		

Source: Field Survey, 2024.

As P-value (0.014) is smaller than significance value (0.05), the Chi-Square value (8.527) is statistically significant (see Table-7) which rejects null hypothesis and accepts alternative hypothesis. That means there is association between peer's influences in selecting subject in undergraduate level.

Further, Respondent 3 writes that;

Although I got good results in finals terminals I would either fail Physics or sometimes Chemistry. These two subjects were too difficult for me no matter how much I tried. But deep inside I know I could've tried more, after opting for science for 6 months I had already realized I should have chosen some other field. Due to this as well, I was not regular in college, In class 11 you could say that I went to college just for 5 months if we count the total days altogether which was also one of the reasons I was performing badly, one problem led to other several problems like it led me to lack self-esteem, it took me a lot to bounce back in class 12. In Bachelor level, with the help of my friend I took social science (Female Respondent 3).

Despite the efforts, Respondent 3's academic struggles during Class 11, particularly with Physics and Chemistry remained challenging to her. These challenges created a ripple effect, leading to low self-esteem and compounding their difficulties. The respondent describes how one issue led to others, forming a cycle of problems that became difficult to break. However, despite these setbacks, they demonstrated resilience by working hard to recover in Class 12. Their experience reflects how academic struggles, mismatched choices, and inconsistent attendance can have far-reaching effects, but also shows that recovery and improvement are possible through determination and effort. Nevertheless, the peer's help and suggestion played an important role in subject selection in Bachelor's level.

One of the female respondents writes "It is easier to pass the exam in social science, so I enrolled in social work rather than B.Sc" (Female Respondent 16). Likewise, another female respondent writes "I like writing my emotions and thoughts and there is no such space in physics and chemistry or math subjects so, although my background is from science, I choose social work and psychology in Bachelor level" (Female Respondent 19). Both the statements above indicate that there is an assumption spread among female students in terms of toughness and softness in science and social science respectively. This indicates, they are escaping the so-called tough and male centric science subject despite their experience in science faculty in Plus Two level.

A male Respondent 27 who is currently pursuing B.Sc. CSIT writes, "I enrolled in B.Sc. CSIT because I am planning to hunt job in this field after my studies complete. As per my peers, there can be an opportunity for paid interns prior to our graduation so this is really fantastic!" (Male

Respondent 27). This statement shows that male student's subject choice is toward science. However, this might not be the situation in every male students. As per a male Respondent 38, *"I have lot of pressure from my family and peers for continuing B.Sc. Physics. My parents do not want me to join Lalitkala (Art) which I wanted to because they think this is what I have to study"* (Male Respondent 38). This indicates, parents still poses their dominance in terms of subject selection, over their children and the traditional concept on gender and subject selection is still prevalent.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This study explores the factors influencing subject selection at the undergraduate level, with a focus on the impact of gendered perceptions, parental and peer influences, and teacher recommendations. The findings indicate that while gender roles continue to shape academic choices, no significant correlation was found between teachers' and parents' suggestions and the actual subjects chosen by students. Despite external recommendations, students tend to select subjects based on personal interests, academic strengths, and perceived career prospects.

Additionally, the research reveals that peer influence plays a pivotal role, particularly among female students, who may shift from science to social sciences due to a combination of academic challenges and societal expectations. The decision to pursue fields such as psychology or social work, which are often perceived as more "feminine", reflects a broader societal trend that associates caregiving professions with women, while technical fields are predominantly linked to men.

Interestingly, despite the persistence of gender segregation in subject choices, the study identifies emerging signs of change, particularly in urban areas. Initiatives aimed at encouraging women to pursue STEM subjects are gaining momentum. Overall, while traditional gender roles continue to influence subject selection, there is a growing recognition and opportunity to dismantle these stereotypes, allowing for more personalized and diverse academic decisions.

To conclude, the subject is itself a gendered. Male students prefer STEM curriculum and female prefer so-called a soft science. The subject selection is affected by various social factors and one of them is peers. This study highlights the critical need to address gender

biases in educational environments to ensure that all students, regardless of gender, have the autonomy to explore and pursue subject aligned with their interests, free from societal constraints. Such a shift not only benefits individual students but also fosters a more equitable and diverse workforce.

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The Confucius Institute and Cross-Cultural Communication Approach to Soft Power in Nepal

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Abstract

Discussions of soft power in recent years have paid a growing amount of attention to international politics. In particular, both Nepal and China have given great importance to cultural exchanges based on Confucius Institutes, which help deepen mutual understanding between the two nations and promote cultural cooperation between Kathmandu and China. This paper utilizes the cultural communication approach to examine China's soft power policies in Nepal through the Confucius Institute, highlighting Nye's concept of 'the power of attraction to a state based on its culture, political values, and foreign policies.' Based on the qualitative narrative analysis, China's concentrated efforts to use soft power diplomacy in Nepal have been a great success, with large investments in culture, education, and tourism. Countries executing the Confucius Institute not only spread the cultural value of CI host countries but also exchange their diverse values and traditions through the language reciprocally.

Keywords

Soft power, Confucius Institute, Nepal-China relationship, Language, Cross-cultural communication.

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2

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1. Introduction

The Chinese government presents the 'Beijing Consensus' (Ramo, 2004), referring to the model of rapid economic development in China, in stark contrast to the 'Washington Consensus' (Williamson 1989) and its neoliberal economic principles to the world. In today's time, global powers, including the Chinese government, believe that soft power is an important factor in shaping the country's image, not only for the government but also for regions, organizations, and individuals. The Chinese government has actively promoted Chinese culture as a crucial component for international exploration, aiming to attract other countries worldwide. In 2004, the Chinese Language Council International, also known as Hanban, a non-governmental and nonprofit organization associated with the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, initiated a significant campaign to advance the "Confucius Institute" (CI) project worldwide, serving as a platform for Chinese language programs. The recent revival of Confucianism and the rapid establishment of Confucius Institutes (CIs) around the world are considered part of China's soft power and foreign policy (Lahtinen, 2015). China has been shaping its 'backyard', i.e., attracting South Asian countries into its policies (Ba, 2003). Political analysts argue that the revival of Confucianism and establishment of Confucius Institutes around the world is China's most convenient gateway to world expansion, much like the American application of the Monroe Doctrine throughout North America (Milestone Documents, 2022).

Control and influence over South Asia have been a long-standing goal for many regional and global powers due to its strategic assets, such as economically significant waterways that facilitate 60% of international maritime trade transitions (Schrag, 2024). Researchers have detected underwater gas fields containing 290 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, and the oceans contribute approximately one-tenth of the world's annual fish catch (Kurlantzick, 2015). Despite China's

geographical proximity, it remained closed to the outside world until the 1990s, allowing the United States, India, Japan, and South Korea to exert significant influence in the region. However, under paramount leader Deng Xiaoping, 1989 represented a watershed moment in China's modernization and repositioning as a worldwide economic powerhouse. With the establishment of the *"good neighborliness and friendship" plan, China began to deliberately enhance relations with neighboring countries as part of its new 'open door' policy for economic growth"* (Ba, 2003). Even today, diplomatic and economic relations play an important role in China's foreign policy. According to Stromseth (2019), China is utilizing a shared focus on U.S. trade and its control over the region, with the aim of ensuring domestic and regional stability, promoting economic development, and balancing U.S. influence in the region by focusing on the foundations of a *"community with a shared future"*. Through this new relationship, Beijing has no doubt that cooperation from regional neighbors will make China's economy sustainable, develop, and lay the foundations for future economic growth.

The relationship between Nepal and the People's Republic of China is deep-rooted and has a long history. Nepal-China relations have always been friendly and cordial. Since the times of Nepalese monk and scholar Buddha Bhadra (early 5th century), Princess Bhrikuti (first half of 7th century), and Araniko (Anige, second half of 13th century), the relationship has existed since ancient times between the two countries, and the bilateral relations continue to develop in many aspects, like education and culture, even today (Shrestha, 2015). And early visits by Chinese monks and scholars, such as Fa Xian (Jin Dynasty), Xuan Zang (Tang Dynasty), etc., consolidated the relationship as two-way and cordial. However, formal and modern relations between the two countries started on August 1, 1955, with the establishment of diplomatic relations. The relationship between the two countries is characterized by friendship, understanding, mutual assistance, cooperation, and respect for each other's sensitivities. The two countries strongly believe in the ideals of the five principles of peaceful coexistence. As mutual friends and close neighbors, Nepal and China have a lot in common in terms of culture and food. Bilateral relations between Nepal and China encompass not only political and official exchanges, but also cultural exchanges such as the exchange of religion, language, and education. These exchanges also occur through various projects and programs, such as the Confucius Institute.

China established the Confucius Institute (CI) in 2007 to project its soft power in Nepal through language and education. The practice and study of cultural communication involves understanding how various cultures interact both verbally and nonverbally within their communities. Inter-cultural and cross-cultural communication are other terms for cultural communication. This paper aims to address this question: How would the Confucius Institute help China and Nepal boost cultural interaction and exchanges? The main discussion of the paper is that both China and Nepal place great importance on cultural exchanges, which are based on the aims and policies of the Confucius Institute. These exchanges aid in deepening mutual understanding between the people of both nations and promoting cultural cooperation.

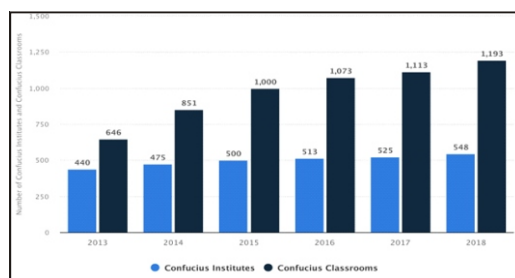
2. Methods

This study employs a qualitative research approach, utilizing the archival/documentary method for its execution. We collect the information for this archival/documentary research from various storage systems such as libraries, research journals, and the Internet. This approach concentrates on scrutinizing previously published texts in various media. We studied and interpreted the collected facts from the study in a detailed and in-depth manner to reach conclusions. We have designed this research to conduct a qualitative study of its subject matter. We have used data from primary and secondary sources to guide this study towards a plausible conclusion. We collected the narrative data by speaking with various personnel from political, bureaucratic, teaching, and university professor backgrounds. Furthermore, the study relies on text-based materials sourced from the internet, which are readily available and free of cost. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), qualitative approaches involve three steps in data analysis: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. The researcher has selected a conceptual framework, sites, research questions, and data collection approaches for data reduction. The reduced data has enhanced the researcher's understanding, facilitating the next step in data collection. In most cases, data display in qualitative research involves presenting the data as a narrative text. We collected numerous data related to the study from primary and secondary sources, and then conducted inductive analysis and interpretation. We employed qualitative data analysis to prepare and organize the data. Next, we reduced the organized data and presented it in a narrative form.

3. Confucius Institute: World and Nepal Overview

The Confucius Institute is a non-profit-making institution that promotes Chinese language and culture around the world. China intends to gain international understanding and goodwill at the same time that it establishes and grows the official organ for promoting Chinese language and culture (cited Lay, 2007). China's traditional culture has always been a source of attraction, and on this basis, with the goal of "planning together, building together, and benefitting together", Chinese and international partner institutions will have established 548 Confucius Institutes and 1193 Confucius Classrooms by the end of 2019 (see Figure-1). These institutions have been continuously meeting the demand of people all over the world to learn Chinese and comprehend Chinese culture. They are a leading brand in international Chinese education because they have served 155 countries and regions worldwide. China has become the third largest host in the world for international students. The number of foreign students enrolled in China rose from thirty-six thousand a decade ago to at least two hundred forty thousand in 2009 and five hundred thousand in 2018 (Wen and Hu, 2023). It shows China is the most popular country in Asia for international students, the leading destination for English-speaking African students worldwide, and the second most popular educational powerhouse in the world. But growing political pressure and scrutiny surrounding Confucius Institutes have led to the closure of some of them (Girard, 2023). China intends to gain international understanding and goodwill at the same time that it establishes and grows the official organ for promoting Chinese language and culture. People view the global expansion of Confucius Institutes favorably, viewing it as an opportunity for countries to comprehend the emerging power and potentially establish significant partnerships with the Chinese people (Tan, 2016).

Figure-1: Growth Chart of Confucius Institutes in the World in Different Years (2013-2018)



Source: Statista, 2019.

Currently, three Confucius institutes are running in Nepal. Among them, Hebei University of Economics and Business cooperated with Kathmandu University to establish the first Confucius Institute in Nepal in 2007. The Confucius Institute provides Chinese language teaching services to Chinese language teachers, provides resources for Chinese language teaching, manages the HSK test (Chinese Proficiency Test), provides information and consulting services on Chinese education, culture, and other fields, and engages in Chinese and foreign language exchange activities. Despite limited resources, a lack of professional institutions, and a shortage of teachers and textbooks, the Confucius Institute at Kathmandu University, now in its 10th year of establishment, continues to contribute to the learning of Chinese language, deep understanding of Chinese culture, and response to it. Furthermore, during Chinese President Xi's visit to Nepal in 2019, East China University of Technology and Qinghai National University of China signed a deal with Tribhuvan University of Nepal to establish another Confucius Institute in March 2020. The Covid-19 pandemic delayed its implementation at TU (Confucius Institute, 2024).

China is exploring its power in culture, education, and politics throughout South Asia through the organization of multiple cultures, festivals, education fairs, and workshops and seminars to educate and influence the new generation of the Nepalese population. When students study abroad through scholarship programs and spend time in courses, their exposure to different cultures, eating habits, and interpersonal interactions plays a significant role in positively influencing them and forming a positive outlook towards their host country. The courses, teaching methods, thesis themes, and environment foster a sense of belonging to a specific place, aligning perfectly with the ideals of the soft power strategy and serving as a model of soft educational power. Numerous studies have examined China's soft power projection, focusing on its objectives, nature, features, developments, challenges, and problems in various regions where Confucius Institutes are located or operate. But there have been few studies in Nepal, lacking in-depth analysis of the soft power approach of China regarding the Confucius Institute and its role in soft power effectiveness in Nepal, which is also a gap in this field. The study will employ Joseph Nye's theory of soft power and his tripartite approaches, which rely on legitimate agenda setting, persuasion, the

attractiveness of values, and the 'impression of kindness, competence' (Nye, 2021), within the context of the Confucius Institute in Nepal.

4. Cultural Communication and Soft Power

The concept of culture encompasses both the aesthetic, symbolic, and linguistic expressions of human beings, as well as the systematic ways of life observed within communities or organizations. UNESCO's World Conference on Cultural Policies in Mexico in 1982 highlighted the global significance of cultural matters. This event broadly defined culture as 'the entire range of unique spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional characteristics' that define a society or social group. This definition encompasses '*ways of life, basic human rights, value systems, traditions, and beliefs*' (UNESCO, 1982: 1). There is a connection between communication and culture. Through communication, people reveal their identities one to another. Similar to words, people use symbols in communication to convey messages to others. Kurylo (2013) asserts that symbols enable the representation or construction of culture through both verbal and nonverbal communication. Scholars (Zhu, 2016; Holmes, 2017; Merkin, 2017; Monaghan, 2020) have asserted that inter-cultural communication can occur between different communities, cultures, nations, or groups within or beyond a single country. Cultural communication shows how people from different cultural backgrounds can effectively communicate by comparing, contrasting, and examining the consequences of the differences in their communication patterns. However, communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds can present challenges, surprises, and re-learning due to the differences in languages, values, and protocols. Contextual barriers, such as language and noise, can impede communication by distorting, blocking, or altering the meaning (Aririguzoh, 2022). So, verbal or non-verbal language is a prominent ingredient in cultural communication.

The importance of soft power has exponentially increased in today's modern world due to the growing emphasis on culture, policy, winning people's hearts, people-to-people approaches to international politics, and relational aspects. Joseph Nye first proposed the concept of soft power in his book 'Bound to Lead', which aimed to explain and predict the continuation of American hegemony during the 1980s national decline (Nye, 1991). The

foundation of his soft power theory stems from his dissatisfaction with the emphasis on hard power in today's contemporary world, which he attributes to public-centric perceptions. Soft power has emerged as a new tool for achieving global international diplomacy objectives. In the original concept, soft power was defined as selective behavioral power, meaning 'getting others to want what you want.' Unlike the 'hard power' of military or economic power, soft power appeals to a state through its culture, values, policies, and institutions. It manifests as a nation's ability to gain geopolitical pull through its cultural values and ideals (Nye 2004: 11,, 2008: 96). Indicators of soft power include reputation, influence, political, cultural, foreign policy, corporate, cultural, digital values, governance, involvement, and education. Theoretically, soft power stems from the appeal of a particular culture, the attractiveness of a nation's domestic political and social values, and the legitimacy, credibility, and substance of its foreign policies, as perceived by others, rather than through coercion or punishment (Nye, 2005).

Although similar concepts had already been discussed in other disciplines like Weber's authority, Foucault's disciplinary power, Habermas' communicative power, Gramsci's hegemony, and Bourdieu's symbolic power, the international political scholars had paid little to no attention to non-material aspects of power, today known to us as 'soft power'. The power of ideas and norms has now penetrated mainstream international politics, and international relations has come to recognize its significance. The concept of soft power has provided a fresh perspective on previously unexplored aspects of international relations that do not involve fear, coercion, or violence, in stark contrast to the concept of 'hard power', which involves these elements.

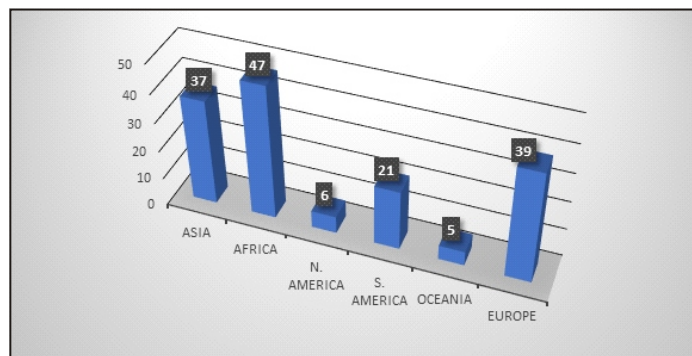
Cultural communication is characterized by a soft form of attachment, where emotions, apathy, values, and culture shape the relationship between individuals. A community executes its commitments and activities by utilizing symbolic resources, such as language and other forms of communication, unrestricted by politics or other forms of coercion. One of the prominent soft power tools is the culture and value of society in different nations. Indeed, it can be argued that China's Confucius Institute significantly enhances cultural interactions and exchanges, fosters mutual understanding, and promotes respect for differences among people. This theoretical framework has aided the research in understanding China's soft

power strategy in Nepal, specifically focusing on the Confucius Institute and the role of language in soft power. The framework has validated the research objectives and facilitated the analysis of CI's cultural communication approach to soft power in Nepal, an area that remains unexplored. The results of the study can shed light on the dilemmas and difficulties seen in the development of China's soft power in Nepal and other small neighboring countries by providing a more systematic and integrated framework.

5. Confucius Institute and Cultural Communication

Diverse cultures prioritize distinct values, which can create challenges in cross-cultural communication when individuals do not share the same perspective on a specific value. This is where language plays a crucial role in mitigating these difficulties. Language can be a powerful tool to promote a greater understanding between different cultures. Therefore, the Chinese network of the Confucius Institute is formed to support Chinese soft power strategies globally with the Chinese language in different cultural communities in the world. On November 21, 2004, Seoul, South Korea, established the first Confucius Institute. Today, there are 556 Confucius Institutes spread across 155 countries and six continents (see figure-2). Through affiliated branches, often organized by host universities and colleges such as Kathmandu University, Tribhuvan University, and LRI School in Nepal, the Confucius Institute promotes Chinese culture internationally. The Chinese Language Council and Chinese government institutions, such as the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Trade, and the State Council Information Office, regulate this and provide history and culture-focused teaching materials and curriculum.

Figure-2: Confucius Institute Across the World 2024



Source: Confucius Institute (2024b) Hanban

At present, the concept of “soft power” has risen exponentially in the fields of international relations and diplomacy. Research, studies, and public debates highlight the significance of soft power in today’s global politics. About three decades ago, Joseph Nye introduced the concept, which immediately captured the attention of leading decision-makers worldwide, particularly those in the U.S., and has continued to do so even more than before. When soft power is effective, it allows states, regardless of their strength, to make their own decisions by following or mimicking the actions of others (Hanh 2018). Soft power has become a tool in international diplomacy and communication for many developed nations around the globe. Soft power stresses the ability to achieve outcomes through attraction or a positive image rather than coercion or payments (Cho and Jeong, 2008). One of the examples of such attraction is culture and language. Soft power has a co-optiv dimension, which means getting other people to agree to what you want through soft power resources such as cultural attraction, ideology, and international institutions. Cooperative power is ‘the ability of a country to develop preferences for other countries to develop preferences or to define their interests in harmony with its own’ (Nye, 2008: 167).

The exchange of ideas, values, traditions, and aspects of culture, including language, are some of the examples of cultural diplomacy. These exchanges help strengthen relations with other countries and thus improve social and cultural cooperation among them. Lee Kuan Yew, a former senior leader of Singapore, once stated that other nations achieve soft power when they admire and aspire to emulate aspects of that nation’s civilization (Gill and Huang, 2006: 26). China’s concentrated efforts to use soft power diplomacy in Nepal have been a success with large investments in religion, education, and tourism. People envision a future for Nepal that favors China on nearly all fronts: economy, culture, and region. CI gives the language an unprecedented role in globalization, facilitating access to English-language popular culture, literature, history, and religious and philosophical traditions (Crystal, 2003).

Despite the limited historical and direct cultural links between Nepal and China, soft power strategies have proven effective at both the people-to-people and government levels in Nepal. However, there are still geographical limitations and socio-cultural restrictions, like language barriers, between the two countries as compared with the geographical and socio-cultural roots between Nepal and India.

Although there has been a shift towards the north, it may take some time for China's soft power attraction to fully penetrate Nepal. History has shown that the Chinese language has played an important role in promoting Chinese nationalism and Chinese cultural identity. The potential for rising Chinese soft power to revive strong Chinese cultural sentiments and pride is a matter of great interest. Chinese people have also absorbed Nepali culture, values, and emotions simultaneously.

The Confucius Institute at Kathmandu University held an elementary Chinese class in association with Jyapu Samaj in March 2024. The Jyapu Samaj is a community organization belonging to one of Nepal's indigenous peoples, the Newar, which is one of the oldest ethnic groups in Nepal with a long history and its own cultural tradition. Mr. Tirtha Lal Maharjan, chairman of the Jyapu Samaj, emphasized that Chinese language learners are increasing in Nepal in recent years, which has not only enriched the life of the community but also given the opportunity to have diverse knowledge of international culture. He hoped that the students would cherish this opportunity to learn Chinese and strive for success, which would enhance the friendship between China and Nepal.

The primary risk in cross-cultural communication between two countries is distortion, which creates misunderstanding or even misrepresentation of the conveyed information. Following the exploration of the Chinese language in Nepal by the Confucius institutes, numerous Nepalese students and skilled orators gained an understanding of the specific values of China, as well as the historical aspects of Chinese people who have worked for mutual honor. Not only did they receive information in the Chinese language, but it also played a crucial role in disseminating information about the host country, preventing cross-cultural misunderstandings between the two countries' communities. Recognizing the influence of culture on individuals and how these individuals in turn impact society is crucial for a skilled communicator (Aririguzoh, 2022). Essentially, communication plays a significant role in shaping the global landscape. Hence, employing suitable communication tactics can facilitate the harmonious integration of diverse cultures.

6. CI's Soft Power in Nepal

The CI at Kathmandu University (KU) has 4 Confucius classrooms and 14 teaching sites and has trained a total of more than

50,000 students (Xinhua, 2023). The university has made significant progress in establishing good cooperative relations with other universities, expanding teaching venues, standardizing management systems, and improving teaching levels and influence. In addition to private and public schools and their students, the Chinese embassy in Nepal has initiated language courses for Nepalese officials. As a Nepalese joint secretary at the Ministry of Education told us, Nepal has a lot to learn from China in sectors like technology, education systems, culture, trade, and tourism. Since language is the only way to learn about these areas, we felt it was necessary to first train our officials in knowledge and technology transfer. Therefore, the soft power concept serves as a valuable tool for comprehending the role and proliferation of CIs. Chinese authorities believe that if foreigners understand more about China and Chinese society, then they will be more friendly and accommodating to China's interests (Ngamsang, 2013). Exchange of culture and language to promote diplomacy and influence other countries is effective because, according to Nye, *"values are central to soft power: soft power rests on some shared values"*. That is why exchanges are often more effective than mere broadcasting.

During the celebration of the 10th establishment ceremony of CI, Vice President of Hebei University of Economics and Business Gao Xiaofeng said, 'The institute has not only opened Chinese language courses at universities, colleges, and primary and secondary schools in Nepal but also has launched other programs, including Chinese classes for the Nepal Army and government officials.' In addition, Bhola Thapa, vice chancellor of KU, said, *"The Confucius Institute not just teaches language but is a part of cultural exchanges. We're proud that we have been part of this exchange through the institute at our university"* (10 July, 2023, Xinhua net). Furthermore, Lili Juo, the program coordinator of one school, stated that China's influence is significantly improving. This improvement has positively impacted the concept of understanding China and encouraged many Nepalese to assimilate the Chinese culture, study in China, and visit China following the implementation of CI in Nepal. Similarly, a junior graduate of CI, Shreyna Shrestha, said that CI doesn't just learn the Chinese language; it's learning a lot of other skills as well, such as communication skills and social skills.

Addressing the inauguration ceremony of CI in Tribhuvan University in 2022, the then Minister for Education, Science, and

Technology (MoEST) of Nepal, Devendra Paudel, expressed the importance of the Chinese language and listed it as an optional course for students from grades nine to 12 starting this year. He asserted that CI can help elevate the relationship between the two countries through language teaching, cultural exchanges, bilateral cooperation, and mutual understanding (2022, August 16, Xinhua net). In addition, Leela Mani Paudel, former ambassador of Nepal to China, says, *'The Chinese language has become very necessary for Nepal's economic and social development, investment, tourism, and higher education.'* Additionally, Wang Xin, the political counselor at the Chinese embassy in Nepal, collaborates with the Nepalese government and individuals from various backgrounds to jointly implement the Global Civilization Initiative, aiming to enhance the Chinese language learning environment for Nepali friends. The graduates have been contributing manpower to Nepal's tourism, infrastructure, business, and trade sectors in particular.

The economic and trade relations between China and Nepal are becoming closer and closer; the demand for recruits who can speak Chinese in Nepal is increasing. Therefore, the Confucius Institute in Nepal possesses significant potential to serve as a crucial component of China's soft power strategy. Since the concept of soft power holds no power dynamics, it encompasses a wide range of forms and dimensions. Among these dimensions, language holds a significant place. The world system continues to maintain language's dominance as an integral part of cultural communication. Language is not just a combination of words. The relationship between society and human beings has evolved into a network of behavior and goal-oriented experience, and through accurate transmission, we can find solutions to problems that neither force nor wealth can solve.

7. Findings and Conclusion

This study examined the rationale behind the opening of the Confucius Institute at the universities in Nepal and its role within an institution of higher education, diplomacy, language planning, and development. Nepalese policymakers hope that a competent group of Nepalese with Chinese language skills will be able to engage with Chinese people and Chinese-owned companies on the ground in Nepal. Chinese diplomats use the CI to show that China wants to build meaningful ties with the Nepalese people by sharing its culture. The Institute has supported the Chinese government in

pursuing its political and economic concerns in Nepal. From China's perspective, the promotion of its language has implications that extend beyond cultural exchanges. It serves as a diplomatic strategy to enhance its reputation, contribute to the cultural diffusion of Chinese language and culture, and position itself as a trustworthy alternative to the West for neighboring peoples.

The soft power of a country rests primarily on three resources: its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority). China's traditional culture has been a source of attraction, building on which it has created several hundred Confucius Institutes around the world to teach its language and culture, including in Nepal. China's concentrated efforts to use soft power diplomacy in Nepal-with large investments in culture, education, and tourism-have been successful at high tables, institutionalizing relationships between government elites.

The agreement between the two countries to establish yet another Confucius Institute at Tribhuvan University after Kathmandu University and mobilize teachers in public and private schools has proved that the attraction of culture as a soft power strategy in Nepal is a success. We have made significant progress in establishing good cooperative relations with other universities, expanding teaching venues, standardizing management systems, and improving teaching levels and influence. It is not only a language institute that promotes language proficiency, but it also provides cultural exploration for individuals seeking to navigate the global world order in contemporary international politics. In history, China had a significant position in civilization, trade, and other aspects, and currently no one can exclude China from the world political landscape because of her economy, strategy, culture, and civilization.

Therefore, through the China Institute (CI), newcomers and freshers can effectively compete with other political powers based on their actual knowledge. It will not only present China to other countries, but also provide a means for them to learn about China through their own natural language proficiency. Through inter-cultural communication, China has enhanced its potential to "liberate" Chinese culture from its traditional geographical and linguistic boundaries, opening up a network of Chinese culture (its

philosophy, history, and literature, for example) to its neighbors and the world. In return, it will facilitate the exchange of cultural values, notions, and diversities between Nepal and China, thereby enhancing bilateral relations through an organic form of communication marked by notable understanding. Also, it spreads the small language culture and other activities in a broader horizon.

Alexander (2004: 113) asserts that those involved in language policy often overlook its influence. Nevertheless, Nepal's language planning policy in higher education has played a role in establishing connections with China from an institutional aspect. As a result, students in Nepal now have the opportunity to benefit from China's economic growth. We cannot overstate the importance of aligning public and cultural diplomacy with modern communication dynamics. Emphasizing horizontal, many-to-many relationships and network exchanges over traditional one-to-many mass communication approaches is crucial in today's digital age. This shift toward engaging audiences in a more interactive and participatory way marks a significant departure from the past strategies of targeting passive audiences. The study concludes that China has achieved huge success in establishing soft power policy by founding CI in Nepal and thereby promoting cross-cultural communication through linguistic discursivity.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Tax Evasion and Revenue Leakage in Nepal: Historical Perspective

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Abstract

This paper explores into the persistent issue of revenue leakage and tax evasion in Nepal across different historical regimes, focusing on the Shah, Rana, Panchayat, democratic, and republican eras. The study scrutinizes how corruption, mismanagement, and favoritism led to widespread revenue misappropriation, causing substantial losses to the state exchequer. The paper examines instances from various periods, including the exploitation of taxation systems, smuggling operations, duty exemptions, and irregularities in tax collections. It highlights instances of misuse of power by rulers and officials, impacting economic development, hindering entrepreneurship, and causing financial losses to the nation. The study reveals a continuous trend of embezzlement, where loopholes in the tax system are exploited for personal gains, ultimately impeding the country's progress and socioeconomic growth.

Keywords

Revenue, Leakage, Tax evasion, Underdevelopment, Nepal.

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3

Tax Evasion and Revenue Leakage in Nepal: Historical Perspective

1. Introduction

There has been continuation in events of revenue leakage and tax evasion in Nepal. During the Shah and Rana regime, there was no difference between public and private property. However, some examples of revenue embezzling events can be found during those times as well. The revenue leakage and tax evasion events seem to have increased tremendously in modern regimes. With the corrupt behavior of the officials working in tax administration, tax evasion and unlawful waiving of tax becomes easy, and the state income gets decreased. The quality of investment from public and financial institutions becomes poor which leads to inflation. Holmes (2015) argues that corruption always leads to decreased revenue to the state, as corrupt officials exempt citizens and firms from fines, taxes, etc. in return for bribes.

This paper aims to explore into the historical analysis of revenue leakage and tax evasion in Nepal, shedding light on their impacts and underlying causes. By examining these facets, it seeks to provide insights into potential strategies to mitigate these issues and enhance the country's fiscal stability.

2. Methodology

The research adopts a historical analytical method to examine the persistent problem of revenue leakage and tax evasion in Nepal throughout diverse historical epochs: the Shah, Rana, Panchayat, democratic, and republican eras. Employing a qualitative approach, the study synthesizes primary sources like historical records, government documents, and scholarly works to trace the patterns and evolution of fiscal mismanagement. By conducting a comparative analysis and scrutinizing specific case studies and scandals from each period, the research unveils how corruption, administrative lapses, and exploitation of tax systems have led to significant revenue losses. It integrates economic theories and empirical evidence to comprehend the complex facets of revenue

misappropriation in Nepal and suggests strategic insights for mitigating these persistent challenges in the country's governance.

3. Understanding Revenue Leakage and Tax Evasion

Revenue leakage refers to the loss of government income or funds that should rightfully be collected through taxes, duties, or other sources due to various factors, including evasion, loopholes, or inefficiencies in the tax system (Karki & Bhattarai, 2019). Revenue leakage represents a critical concern for governments worldwide, constituting the loss or shortfall of revenue that should rightfully increase from various sources such as taxes, tariffs, or duties. It denotes the gap between the potential revenue the government could collect, and the actual amount collected, resulting from a myriad of factors including evasion strategies, regulatory loopholes, or inefficiencies within the tax collection mechanisms (Karki & Bhattarai, 2019).

Revenue leakage manifests in multiple forms, encompassing tax evasion, avoidance, non-compliance, and ineffective tax administration. Tax avoidance, however, refers to legal strategies employed to minimize tax liabilities without violating the law, often leveraging loopholes or preferential tax treatments. Several factors contribute to revenue leakage, including inadequate enforcement mechanisms, complex tax structures, global economic influences, and regulatory loopholes. These loopholes and inefficiencies create opportunities for tax evasion tactics and non-compliance behaviors, resulting in substantial revenue losses for governments (Shrestha & Pant, 2020). The implications of revenue leakage are far-reaching, impacting a nation's fiscal health, economic stability, and societal well-being. Reduced government revenue restricts funding for essential public services, infrastructure development, and social welfare programs, hindering socioeconomic progress and exacerbating income inequality (Dhakal, 2018).

Addressing revenue leakage necessitates comprehensive measures, including improving tax compliance through enhanced enforcement, simplifying tax structures, closing regulatory loopholes, and fostering international cooperation to combat cross-border tax evasion (Rai, 2020). Strengthening tax administration, increasing transparency, and leveraging technological advancements for better monitoring and compliance also play pivotal roles in curbing revenue leakage (Thapa & Pokharel, 2019). So, the

revenue leakage represents a multifaceted challenge for governments, significantly impacting their fiscal stability and hindering economic development.

In the other hand, tax evasion involves illegal or unethical practices by individuals or corporations to avoid paying taxes by underreporting income or exploiting legal loopholes (Poudel & Dhungel, 2017). Tax evasion represents a deliberate and illicit effort by individuals or entities to evade paying taxes owed to the government by employing fraudulent, illegal, or unethical means. It involves a spectrum of practices aimed at misrepresenting income, assets, or expenses to reduce tax liabilities, exploiting legal loopholes, or intentionally disregarding tax obligations to avoid paying the full amount of taxes owed (Poudel & Dhungel, 2017). Tax evasion encompasses various activities, including underreporting income, overstating deductions, concealing assets, engaging in cash transactions to evade detection, and utilizing offshore accounts or complex financial structures to hide wealth (Karki & Bhattarai, 2019). It is a violation of tax laws and regulations, compromising the integrity of the tax system and contributing to revenue losses for governments.

Tax evasion assumes various forms, ranging from small-scale individual evasion to sophisticated schemes orchestrated by corporations or high-net-worth individuals (Shrestha & Pant, 2020). Its causes are multifaceted, including a lack of compliance culture, complex tax structures, inadequate enforcement, globalization facilitating offshore tax havens, and gaps in regulatory frameworks that create opportunities for evasion. Tax evasion has profound implications for governments, economies, and societies. It results in significant revenue losses, undermining a government's ability to fund essential public services, infrastructure development, and social welfare programs (Dhakal, 2018). Furthermore, it distorts market fairness, exacerbates income inequality, and erodes public trust in the fairness and effectiveness of the tax system.

Combating tax evasion necessitates robust enforcement mechanisms, enhanced transparency, and international cooperation to address cross-border evasion and offshore tax havens (Rai, 2020). Strengthening tax administration, implementing stricter penalties for evasion, improving taxpayer education, and leveraging technology for better monitoring and compliance are critical strategies in mitigating tax evasion. So, tax evasion poses significant challenges to

governments and societies, undermining fiscal integrity and hindering economic development. Understanding its various forms, causes, and implementing effective enforcement measures and policies are vital in combating tax evasion and fostering fair and equitable taxation for sustainable economic growth.

4. Impact of Revenue Leakage and Tax Evasion

Revenue leakage and tax evasion have substantial impacts on economies globally. Revenue leakage refers to the loss of income or funds that a government or organization should rightfully collect, often occurring due to inefficiencies, loopholes, or intentional evasion. Tax evasion, on the other hand, involves illegal means to evade paying taxes, such as underreporting income, overvaluing deductions, or hiding assets. Both phenomena significantly affect government revenues, public services, and economic stability (OECD, 2020).

The consequences of revenue leakage and tax evasion are multifaceted. Firstly, these practices reduce the government's ability to generate income necessary for funding essential public services. The shortfall in revenue can hamper investments in infrastructure, healthcare, education, and social welfare programs (PwC, 2019). As a result, citizens might experience reduced access to quality public services, hindering societal development and welfare.

Moreover, revenue leakage and tax evasion contribute to economic inequality by placing a disproportionate burden on honest taxpayers. When individuals or corporations evade taxes, the government might compensate by raising taxes on compliant taxpayers or cutting public services, exacerbating income disparities (Alstadsæter *et al.*, 2019). This inequality can breed social discontent and erode trust in the fairness of the tax system and government institutions. Furthermore, revenue leakage and tax evasion have wider implications for national economies. They can weaken investor confidence, hinder foreign direct investment, and limit economic growth opportunities. Reduced government revenue also impacts fiscal deficit levels, potentially leading to increased borrowing or decreased expenditure in critical areas, affecting macroeconomic stability (IMF, 2018).

Similarly, some study indicates that revenue leakage and tax evasion have severe economic ramifications for Nepal, leading to substantial revenue deficits and hindering the government's ability

to fund essential public services and infrastructure projects (Acharya & Basnyat, 2016). The resultant budget shortfalls constrain development initiatives and impede overall economic progress. The societal impact of revenue leakage and tax evasion in Nepal is profound, exacerbating income inequality and impeding efforts to address poverty and social welfare (Bhandari, 2019). Reduced government revenue limits investment in healthcare, education, and social programs, widening the gap between the affluent and marginalized communities.

Studies demonstrate that revenue leakage and tax evasion impede the government's capacity to provide quality services and develop vital infrastructure, stalling progress in sectors crucial for Nepal's socio-economic advancement (Dhungana & Thapa, 2018). Inadequate resources hinder the delivery of basic services, hampering overall societal well-being.

The revenue leakage and tax evasion pose significant challenges to economies worldwide, impacting government revenues, public services, economic equality, and stability. Addressing these issues demands collaborative efforts at local, national, and international levels to strengthen tax systems, promote compliance, and foster transparency to ensure fair and equitable contributions from all entities.

5. Revenue Leakage and Tax Burden over the People in Shah and Rana Regime

During the Shah regime, internal conflict and continuation of state extension led to the reduction in income resources after the death of Prithvi Narayan Shah. Due to the luxurious lifestyle of the King and royal family, the expenses of the palace were increasing. The military management had been a burden to the state and the state had been sinking into crisis (Whelpton, 2005). To manage the crisis, the contemporary government had increased the taxation rate to entrepreneurs and businessmen due to which many cottage industries and business got closed (Aryal, 2061 B.S.). At that time, the big landlords did not bear any responsibility to the state while poor people must pay expensive taxation (Regmi, 1999).

During the Shah Regime, tax was collected from the three levels, palace, state, and local administration. The Kings used to collect tax casually in the name of sacred programs. One of the taxations on public level was darshanbhet which was collected while giving

appointment and promotion to the public service employees and military personnel. Similarly, various traders such as oil and curd also had to pay tax. The hunters and those using meat of dead animals had to offer skin to the government. Later, this tax was collected as cash (Regmi, 1999). There was not a well-managed and scientific system to keep record of the tax collected at that time. Thus, there had been excessive misuse of the tax (Regmi, 2074 B.S.).

The situation remained the same during the Rana regime. With the intension of increasing income, Rana rulers offered the contract of custom to the bidders who gave the most auction amount. The tax collected after the auction amount would be the income of the contractor. The contractor started importing more and more goods to increase tax. The general people were affected by this (Pande, 2076 B.S.). During this time, many custom offices were established towards the south border of the country. Not only the customs, but the Rana rulers also collected money from different checkpoints within the country as Jagaat (a kind of tax). Jagaat was also collected through contractors. The people paid jagaat in seven places while transporting goods from Bhairahawa to Pokhara (Pande, 2076 B.S. : 129).

Similarly, there had been impropriety in exchange rate of Indian coins in Nepal in 1945. Also, the cost of silver was much higher in India than Nepal. At that time, Mahendramalli coins made from silver were smuggled to India. There was black market of Nepali coins in India. The smuggling between Nepal and India started from that time (Pande, 2076a B.S.). The smuggling continued until 1950. To stop the smuggling, the coins were made by mixing silver, copper, and nickel from 1948. However, the smuggling was not stopped. There had been a huge revenue evasion in Nepal due to that smuggling (Pande, 2076b B.S.).

During this time, a heavy tax was levied on the general people to manage the resources for their luxurious lifestyle. Many small and cottage industries were closed because of inability to pay heavy tax. Similarly, a big burden was added to the national treasury when the rulers smuggled a lot of silver coins for their own benefit. While the rulers gave emphasis to their own benefit rather than giving priority to the country's development, development could come in priority. This kind of trend affected the development of the country in three ways. First, the small cottage industries got closed due to inability to pay heavy tax. It destroyed entrepreneurship and decreased employment opportunities in the country. Second, the heavy tax

collected from the people was used for lavish lifestyle of the rulers rather than investing in the economic growth and development related activities in the country. Third, the means and resources of the country were out flown to India by smuggling.

6. Revenue Leakage and Tax Evasion in Post Rana Regime

During the Panchayat regime as well, there had been excessive revenue leakage and tax evasion. The carpet scandal of 1974 was one of the examples. The rulers used to provide custom exempt to the businessmen for importing the foreign currencies and increasing the revenue. During the import of carpet, the contemporary government had provided huge custom-free to the businessmen (ReMAC Nepal, 2063 B.S.). Total 91 people including the contemporary Prime Minister Tulsī Giri, four ministers and other officials along with the businessmen were accused in that scandal. The Commission for Corruption Control had investigated them and convicted them of corruption in 1976 (Subedi, 2069 B.S.). Some businessmen were freed with some fines while the politicians along with Dr. Giri were given clean chit in 1980 (ReMAC Nepal, 2063 B.S.). Similarly, the contemporary director general of the Department of Commerce, Raman Upadhyaya writes; there have been numerous cases of revenue leakage and carpet scandal is representative of all those scandals (Upadhyaya, 2062 B.S.; 52). The contemporary Minister for the Ministry of Commerce Subedi (2069 B.S.: 27-28) writes.

“One day, the contemporary Finance Secretary Dr. Bhesh Bahadur Thapa told me that there had been revenue leakage, we could not stop, please help. Three people were given the right to sell the duty-free goods at that time. Two of them were relatives of Chief Secretary of the King Kaji Hansa Man Singh and another was relatives of ADC of King General Sher Bahadur Malla., nobody could raise voice against them. There had been revenue leakage of about 80 million rupees annually.”

The revenue leakage and tax evasion that flourished during the Panchayat regime increased more during democratic and republican regimes. Sher Bahadur Deuba had provided duty free in purchasing cars and foreign currency exchange facility to the members of the parliament for sustaining his government. With that decision, the members of parliament got cars at half price. They misused the facility received and traded those cars to get profit. Total 479 individuals-236 MPs from the 265 member lower and upper houses

of parliament, 54 special class officials, and 101 officials from the judicial services, 14 officers of the Royal Nepalese Army (RNA) and 74 from the other service categories-imported duty-free vehicles during that time. The State Affairs Committee of Parliament investigated the government decision and concluded that it had caused the nation a loss of Rs. 500 million in revenue and that those that had imported the vehicles for personal use were still using official vehicles for personal conveyance. This provision got dismissed on April 20, 1998 (Parajuli, 2077 B.S. : 195). The King continued this after he took over state power on February 1, 2005. After this, the King imported two luxurious cars costing 140 million rupees each for the palace without paying custom duty (ReMAC Nepal, 2063 B.S.: 15).

The first meeting of the CA held on May 28, 2008, announced Nepal as a republican country. The events of revenue leakage and tax evasion continued in the republican regime as well. The CPN (Maoist) party turned 94 cars and jeeps brought from India custom free into the private ones. According to the agreement made between the contemporary Peace and Reconstruction minister Ram Chandra Poudel and CPN (Maoist) leader Ram Bahadur Thapa on June 2007, the duty-free vehicles the CPN (Maoist) party had were registered formally in the transportation office without paying tax. Up to 170 percent of the price should be paid as custom duty for importing the cars including custom based on the capacity and price, excise, and VAT. While the CPN (Maoist) legalized the cars and jeeps they had, the government had a loss of at least 40 million rupees (Pro Public, 2065 B.S.: 52).

The businessmen who looted the state had domination over the government during the tenure of the contemporary Finance Minister Bharat Mohan Adhikari in 2011. Adhikari was very close to all the businessmen and traders. The decisions of the Finance Ministry were done inside the houses of the businessmen and the tax rate and limit were changed based on the wish of the businessmen. Meanwhile, Finance Secretary Rameshwor Khanal resigned from his post in 2011 because of the activities of the minister (Thapa, 2069 B.S.: 299).

The Internal Revenue Department had formed an investigation committee on December 23, 2010, to investigate false VAT bill use. According to the committee, 3.25 billion rupees of tax invasion was done. During the investigation, 5 hundred and 18 business firms were found to have used a false VAT bill. 70 million VAT, 3.33 billion

income tax and 205 million of excise had been misappropriated. The tax of 6.49 billion was fixed by the Revenue Tribunal. The businessmen had filed a case against this taxation in the Supreme Court. But the Court made the decision in favor of the Revenue Tribunal on January 13, 2020 (Gyawali, 2076 B.S.). Nepal's Department of Revenue Investigation has filed lawsuits claiming a total 24.74 billion rupees in tax evasion in the fiscal year 2020/021 (DRI, 2078 B.S.).

The revenue leakage and tax evasion activities flourished during the Shah and Rana regimes did not stop after the establishment of democracy as well. Rather, it flourished more. The national treasury was exploited by the royal palace, high level politicians and administrative leaders after establishing the democracy. This trend of exploitation continued during the panchayat, democratic, and republican regimes as well. The activities like importing luxury cars without paying custom, making false VAT bills in alliance with the businessmen, and various others leading to excessive financial embezzlement and corruption continued.

7. Loot in Tax Exemption

In the name of tax exempt, the national treasury in Nepal has been emptied. The government of Nepal formed a three-member Tax Settlement Commission in 2014. The committee decided to collect 9 billion 546 million 115 thousand, 6 hundred and 40 rupees out of 30 billion 525 million 778 thousand 9 hundred 37 rupees remnant. According to the report submitted on December 8, 2015, the remaining 20 billion 979 million 663 thousand 2 hundred and 97 rupees was exempt. The tax was decided to be collected in the state treasury, but the majority was recovered by the corporations. A huge amount of tax to be paid from company were exempt (Acharya and Gyawali, 2074 B.S.).

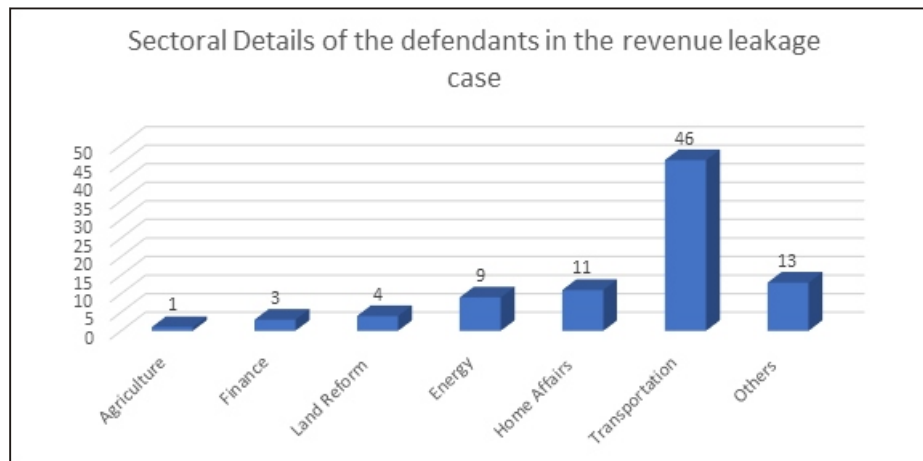
Table-1: Detail of the Tax Exempt

Entity	Tax to be paid	Tax paid	Percentage paid
Government corporation	11 billion 856 million 6 hundred thousand	5 billion 443 million 600 thousand	57
Private enterprises and company	18 billion 668 million	4 billion 102 million 422 thousand	22

Source : Acharya & Gyawali (2074 B.S.)

From the reference data, it is found that the events of revenue leakage have also been increasing. The officials responsible for revenue collection are found to have been involved in illegal tax exemption and irregularities in the revenue amount. With the investigation on the complaints made, CIAA had filed 12 cases related to revenue leakage against 87 people in the fiscal year 2019/20 (Figure-1).

Figure-1: List of Officials against whom the Cases related to Revenue Leakage were Filed



Source: CIAA, 2077 B.S.

In a study carried out during the republican system, 50 percent of revenue could not be collected due to embezzlement. According to the report, the businessmen either do not want to pay the tax or they want to pay less (Pro Public, 2065 B.S.: 189).

Yikona *et al.* (2011) finds out that tax evasion has a negative impact on economic growth and development. Tax evasion siphons away money which could be invested in productive areas like diversifying the economy, infrastructure, and social problem. It also leads to the leakage of financial resources away from the national budget toward private spending. Their study concludes that revenue embezzlement leads to underdevelopment. There are various records of revenue embezzlement in the history of Nepal as well. In this way, the loot over the national treasury in the name of tax settlement continued during the republican regime. The events of tax evasion increased during that time.

The government agencies in Nepal tasked with investigating revenue leakage and tax evasion face multifaceted challenges in

effectively addressing these issues. While agencies like the Inland Revenue Department (IRD) and the Department of Money Laundering Investigation (DMLI) play pivotal roles, their efforts encounter several obstacles. Limited resources, including human capital and technological infrastructure, often hinder the comprehensive investigation of complex financial schemes aimed at evading taxes. The agencies also encounter challenges related to cross-border transactions and international cooperation, as transnational tax evasion requires collaboration with foreign jurisdictions and entities, which can be intricate and time-consuming due to legal and bureaucratic barriers. Furthermore, the prevalence of informal economic activities and the lack of widespread tax literacy among the population contribute to difficulties in identifying and addressing revenue leakage and tax evasion effectively.

Moreover, these agencies often face internal challenges, such as corruption and lack of autonomy, which can undermine their ability to conduct impartial investigations. Political interference and bureaucratic hurdles may impede the agencies' autonomy, affecting their capacity to pursue high-profile cases of tax evasion without external pressures. Additionally, the slow judicial process and gaps in legal frameworks sometimes result in prolonged investigations and inadequate prosecution of tax evaders, leading to a lack of deterrence against such financial misconduct. These challenges collectively present formidable barriers for government agencies in Nepal, limiting their efficacy in combating revenue leakage and tax evasion comprehensively.

8. Conclusion and Way Forward

The historical analysis of revenue leakage and tax evasion in Nepal spans various regimes, revealing consistent patterns of financial misconduct, corruption, and mismanagement. Across the Shah, Rana, Panchayat, democratic, and republican eras, instances of exploitation, embezzlement, and misuse of tax systems have significantly impacted the nation's fiscal stability and economic progress. The study sheds light on the multifaceted nature of revenue leakage and tax evasion, delineating their impact on societal welfare, economic development, and governance. Throughout Nepal's history, these phenomena have led to substantial losses in government revenue, hindered essential public service provisions, exacerbated income inequality, and eroded public trust in institutions.

The implications of revenue leakage and tax evasion are far-reaching, transcending different regimes. The consequences encompass decreased investment in critical sectors, limited infrastructure development, and impediments to socio-economic progress. Moreover, the exploitation of tax systems, corrupt practices, and tax exemptions have further widened the gap between the affluent and marginalized communities.

Way forward may be summarized as under:

- ▶▶ Implementing robust tax policies that simplify tax structures and eliminate loopholes to prevent evasion. Strengthening regulatory frameworks and enhancing tax administration to ensure fairness and transparency in tax collection.
- ▶▶ It is recommended to uphold the placement of the Revenue Investigation Department and the Asset Recovery Department within the scope of the Abuse of Authority Investigation Commission. The autonomy and independent functioning of these bodies are crucial factors. Operating free from executive influence allows these departments to conduct impartial and autonomous actions, ensuring fair and unbiased investigations.
- ▶▶ Investing in technology-driven solutions for better monitoring and compliance. Enhancing investigative capabilities, bolstering enforcement mechanisms, and increasing penalties for tax evasion to deter financial misconduct.
- ▶▶ Facilitating cooperation with international entities to combat cross-border tax evasion and offshore financial havens. Strengthening partnerships to exchange information and tackle global tax evasion effectively.
- ▶▶ Promoting tax literacy among the populace, fostering a culture of compliance, and encouraging citizens' participation in accountable governance processes to scrutinize revenue collection and prevent malpractices.
- ▶▶ Addressing internal challenges within government agencies by ensuring autonomy, reducing corruption, and streamlining bureaucratic processes to enable impartial investigations and prosecutions.
- ▶▶ Enhancing legal frameworks to expedite judicial processes related to tax evasion cases, ensuring timely prosecution and deterrent actions against offenders.

- » Establishing mechanisms for regular monitoring, evaluation, and assessment of tax systems' effectiveness in curbing revenue leakage and tax evasion, enabling timely adjustments and improvements.

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Ethnicity, Marriage and Marital Status in Nepal

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Abstract

The trends and patterns of marriage and marital status are gradually changing worldwide, including in Nepal. These changes are influenced by various factors, including age, education, employment, income, and ethnic background. This paper examines the evolving patterns of marriage and marital status among individuals in Nepal over the past 25 years (one generation), utilizing longitudinal data from the Nepal Living Standard Survey (NLSS) spanning from 1995/96 to 2022/23. Nepali society is undergoing a progressive shift from traditional to modern and from underdeveloped to developing, as socio-economic changes take effect. This paper argues that as long as ethnic diversity persists within the population, noticeable differences in marital status will continue to exist across ethnic groups, underscoring a significant association between ethnicity and marital status. Consequently, marriage and marital practices are primarily shaped by the social and cultural differences of various ethnic groups within the broader population, including Hill Caste, Mountain/Hill Janajati, Madheshi/Tarai Caste, Mountain/Hill Dalit, Madhesh/Tarai Janajati, Madhesh/Tarai Dalit, and various religious and linguistic groups.

Keywords

Ethnicity, Marriage, Marital status, Nepal.

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4

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1. Ethnic Groups and Ethnicity

The concepts of ethnic and ethnicity have been widely discussed worldwide, including in Nepal, over the past few decades. These ideas originated alongside the process of modern development in Europe, America, and beyond, though they have a longer historical foundation. While the concepts are now debated globally, the focus and nuances vary in different regions. Before delving into the concept of ethnicity specifically within the Nepalese context, it is worthwhile to examine how various scholars have contributed to its conceptualization.

Banton (2015) provides a thorough examination of the origins and expansion of “ethnic” and “ethnicity”. His insights shed light on these conceptual issues. Banton (2015) references *The Social Systems of American Ethnic Groups*, a 1945 publication by W. Lloyd Warner and Leo Srole, which used the term “ethnic group” to describe eight cultural minorities of the white “race” residing in Massachusetts, who were perceived as progressing toward becoming “one hundred percent Americans” (p. 96). However, the concept of ethnicity was absent in their discussion. Banton (2015: 96) further clarifies:

The authors made no mention of ‘ethnicity’; the first recorded use of that word is dated from 1953, when the sociologist David Riesman referred to ‘the groups who, by reason of rural or small-town location, ethnicity, or other parochialism, feel threatened by the better educated upper-middle-class people’. Whether or not he intended this, Riesman’s change from the adjective ‘ethnic’ to the noun ‘ethnicity’ implied that there was some distinctive quality in the sharing of a common ethnic origin that explained why people such as those he referred to might feel threatened by upper-middle-class people, who, apparently, did not attach the same significance to their own ethnic origins. They did not count as ‘ethnics’.

The term ethnic was initially defined to categorize people based on origin and history. Over time, the concept evolved to encompass a

sense of “we-feeling” - the sense of identity and connection individuals feel with their ethnic group. This classification of people based on distinct individual and collective characteristics has since spread globally. Banton (2015: 99) continues:

In the English language, the adjective 'ethnic' came into use initially to identify a certain kind of social group or category and as an improvement on some questionable uses of the word 'race'. It aided the growth of practical knowledge. One stimulus was a book of 1935 that was designed to explain to a popular readership how in Nazi Germany a kind of racial theory with pre-Darwinian origins was being used in a scientifically unjustifiable manner. Julian Huxley and A. C. Haddon maintained that 'ethnic group' would be a better name for the physical categories that bore names like Slav, Mediterranean, Nordic and Alpine; they thought it should replace the word 'race'.

As noted, in 1950 an expert committee convened by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) advised that “it would be better when speaking of human races to drop the term ‘race’ altogether and speak of ethnic groups.” This marked a shift toward defining ethnic groups as social categories that transcend national boundaries, aiming to correct doctrines previously claimed to be scientific (Banton, 2015: 99). Over time, the conceptualization of ethnicity has expanded, encompassing broader contexts and dimensions. Banton (2015) suggests that the notion of ethnicity evolved in response to these changes.

References to ethnic groups soon gave rise to discussions on ethnicity itself. *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience*, edited by Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan, became highly influential in this regard. The volume stemmed from a conference that brought together theoretical and empirical studies of situations in which ethnic groups differentiate themselves. The editors emphasized the new reality represented by the term ethnicity, reflecting a shift in social identity. They noted, “We are suggesting that a new word reflects a new reality, and a new usage reflects a change in that reality. The new word is ‘ethnicity’” (Banton, 2015: 103). Thus, the concept of ethnicity encompasses any social group distinguished by specific social, cultural, or economic characteristics, fostering a sense of shared identity or “we-feeling” among its members. In essence, ethnicity is a social group marked by a collective identity rooted in shared social and cultural backgrounds.

2. Marriage, Family, and Change in Marriage Foundations over Time

Throughout history, the structure and function of marriage and family have evolved significantly across time and space. This gradual shift in social structures has been noted by Perini and Sironi (2016: 41-42), who state, *“Family structure across the world has changed in recent decades. In particular, there has been a significant increase in marital disruptions, caused by two main factors: poor relationship quality and a weak commitment to marriage. Several studies have shown marital disruption to be a social phenomenon that can produce various consequences for individual well-being”*. These changes not only affect the well-being of individuals and households but also reflect broader socio-cultural transformations within society.

Killewald (2016) defines marriage as a social institution, emphasizing that rates of marital stability and their determinants can vary across different times and places. In the United States, for example, the latter half of the twentieth century saw significant changes: women’s college completion rates caught up to and surpassed those of men, their labor force participation increased dramatically, and the gender earnings gap among full-time workers narrowed (Goldin, 2006). Concurrently, the average time wives spent on unpaid labor declined substantially (Bianchi *et al.*, 2012). Couples began to marry later in life and were more likely to divorce (Fitch and Ruggles, 2000; Stevenson and Wolfers, 2007). Women’s earnings became positively correlated with marriage formation (Sweeney, 2002), and gender role attitudes evolved toward greater egalitarianism (Thornton and Young-DeMarco, 2001, cited in Killewald, 2016 : 699).

In addressing marriage and family dynamics, Mo (2016) focuses on family dissolution, including trends in divorce. Mo (2016) notes that *“family dissolution has long been regarded as an important issue both socially and academically. Several theoretical approaches are relevant to establishing causal relationships between various socio-economic and cultural factors and marital disruption. However, despite existing literature on the influence of these determining factors on divorce trends, most studies focus on the Western world, and there is little consensus on the determinants of marital dissolution”*.

Andersson (2016: 51) highlights that increases in the prevalence of divorce and non-traditional family forms have sparked interest in

how attitude orientations relate to these demographic outcomes. Macro-level data reveal that both countries (Surkyn and Lesthaeghe, 2004) and cohorts (Paginini and Rindfiiss, 1993) demonstrate that the presence of non-traditional family behaviors, such as cohabitation and union dissolution, correlates with a growing tolerance for these phenomena. Conversely, individuals adhering to traditional ideals—such as being married with children—exhibit less permissive attitudes toward non-traditional family behaviors than do divorcees or cohabitants (Sieben and Verbakel, 2013). This observation leads researchers to hypothesize that family-related attitudes may significantly influence demographic behavior. In Nepal, the patterns and practices surrounding marriage, sexual relationships, and marital status are also evolving in response to societal changes.

The changing nature of social structures and institutions is frequently examined in relation to capitalism and imperialism. In his book *Badalindo Nepali Samaaj (Changing Nepali Society)*, Mishra (2070 VS) highlights significant social transformations occurring within Nepali society, particularly in the realms of marriage, family, household dynamics, income, education, and health. As Nepal opened its doors to the world, capitalism and imperialism began to infiltrate its economic and political systems, thereby influencing and reshaping local culture to mirror that of imperialist countries. According to Mishra (2010), this imperialist influence has resulted in two critical issues: first, a constriction of the concept of the “local”, and second, the imposition of a singular economic framework coupled with a uniform cultural model.

Mishra (2070 VS) further explains that local culture, including household structures, is evolving in response to broader societal changes. As society increasingly incorporates elements of national culture, distinct local characteristics are gradually being erased. This transformation affects various aspects of households, including their size, headship, income, and relationships among members. Changes are also evident in individual attitudes, behaviors, and relationships within households, which are closely tied to social institutions such as marriage and family. Such dynamics resemble planting a new species into an existing root system, altering cultural landscapes across domains, including marriage, family, and social status.

3. Social and Cultural Basis of Marital Status

Perini and Sironi (2016) have examined the issue of gender differences in marital status, specifically focusing on how these

differences manifest in the context of subjective well-being. They argue that understanding the relationship between subjective well-being and marital status necessitates consideration of potential gender disparities. In particular, when exploring the experiences of separated and divorced individuals, it is essential to assess whether the consequences of divorce are similar for men and women (Perini and Sironi, 2016). Research indicates that while both genders experience the effects of divorce, there are notable differences in depression levels associated with this experience. Oldehinkel et al. (2008, cited in Perini and Sironi, 2016) propose that women may be more sensitive to the effects of marital breakdown than men, attributing this sensitivity to greater emotional awareness among women.

However, women's heightened emotional distress may stem not only from gender differences in sensitivity to life events but also from material changes in their economic circumstances. Studies show that while men's incomes often remain relatively stable after separation, women's incomes tend to decline significantly and do not return to pre-separation levels (Perini and Sironi, 2016). In many patriarchal societies, marital relationships are heavily influenced by men's income, which underscores the importance of recognizing that theories surrounding marriage, divorce, and separation are largely shaped by the economic and socio-cultural contexts of individuals.

The context of this study is further elaborated through Konieczny's (2016) analysis, which reveals that congregations that successfully offer outreach programs-characterized by frequent counseling and the presence of post-divorce support-exhibit three distinct cultural elements not found in congregations with infrequent or absent outreach. First, these congregations maintain a realistic yet confident view of marriage as a lifelong commitment, fostering relationships among pastors, counselors, and members that affirm the value of marital permanence and the effectiveness of marriage crisis outreach. Second, they are empowering environments, cultivating local cultures that enable lay members-whether married, divorced, or single-to embrace their efficacy in intimate relationships and service to others. Third, these congregations engage in a cultural transformation of marriage ideals, generating local discourses that both incorporate and challenge the individualized model of marriage prevalent in American society, utilizing religious resources (Konieczny, 2016).

In Nepal, socio-cultural transformation is also underway, necessitating a closer examination of various social institutions, including marriage and family, in the present context. This raises pertinent questions about how the social and cultural backgrounds of individuals in Nepali society shape marriage and its various dimensions, particularly marital status. Moreover, given the diversity of ethnic groups in Nepal-each with its own social and cultural practices-it is essential to explore how ethnicity influences individual attitudes and behaviors. The relationship between ethnicity and marital status in the context of contemporary Nepal remains an underexplored area, warranting further investigation.

4. Objectives, Data Sets and Methods

Nepali society and culture have undergone rapid changes over the past two to three decades, particularly across a generation (25 years). Marriage and family are fundamental units of society, serving as the starting point for social change. This paper explores the transformations occurring within Nepali society and examines how changes in individuals' marital status are associated with their ethnic background or culture, which is also evolving.

To track changes in the living standards of the population of Nepal, the Nepal Living Standard Survey (NLSS) has been conducted periodically, typically every five years. The fourth NLSS, carried out over an 11-year span from 2010/11 to 2022/23, follows the third round of the survey. Each survey includes a question regarding the marital status of every member of the surveyed household.

The NLSS is primarily designed to measure poverty levels within the country. In measuring poverty, it also accounts for other different features of population including ethnic background. This paper explores ethnic background based statuses of individuals. Utilizing survey data sets from three different NLSS rounds-first, third, and fourth-this study explores the relationship between marital status and ethnicity. Bivariate analysis was employed to assess this relationship, with ethnicity and marital status cross-tabulated to generate two-way tables displaying the results.

Given the changes in individuals' ethnic background, corresponding shifts in marital status are anticipated. There has been a gradual change in marital status over the 27-year period from

1995/96 to 2022/23. This paper examines the results on ethnicity and marital status at three specific points in time: 1995/96, 2010/11, and 2022/23, using cross-sectional data. Each time point is discussed separately, followed by a comparison of the changes observed over the 27-year period. In this context, the comparison of cross-sectional data across time provides a longitudinal perspective. Some additional necessary and relevant data on marriage, and marital status have been borrowed from Nepal Demographic and Health Survey (2022) report and data as well.

The application of cross-tabulation and statistical techniques offers descriptive statistics, including two-way tables and non-parametric hypothesis testing using the Chi-Square test. Based on the analysis of these two-way tables and tests of association or independence, conclusions are drawn regarding the relationship between ethnicity and marital status.

5. Theoretical Background: Attitudinal Change and Family Dynamics

Various factors contribute to the nature of marriage and the marital status of individuals. These factors encompass both sociological and psychological elements, often interacting to shape marital dynamics. Andersson (2016) elaborates on this interplay, stating:

Building on theoretical and empirical research in social psychology, recent sociological studies have explored the behavioral effects on family attitudes using extensive survey data (see, e.g., Levinger, 1976). One influential framework is Cognitive Dissonance Theory (CDT), which suggests that when behaviors conflict with one's attitudes, it creates cognitive dissonance, leading to psychological discomfort (Festinger, 1957). To alleviate this discomfort, individuals often adjust their attitudes to align with their behaviors. For instance, if someone views marriage as an oppressive institution but still chooses to marry, they may experience psychological distress. In this scenario, adopting more supportive views of marriage-such as becoming critical of separation-can be seen as a defensive reaction to resolve cognitive dissonance. The Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) (Ajzen and Fishbein, 2000: 51-52) offers another framework for analyzing the relationships among behavior, attitudes, and attitude changes, positing that attitudes are specific and evaluative toward particular objects.

Ultimately, both individual and collective behaviors in any society are shaped socio-psychologically. An individual's attitudes and behaviors are influenced by the social psychology of their environment. Consequently, understanding the foundations of marriage and marital status requires a philosophical exploration of the sociological underpinnings of socio-cultural behavior. To elucidate this philosophical context, we can refer to Andersson's (2016 : 52) insights:

Ontologically, a change in attitudes can represent either a superficial adjustment to a behavior or a deeper change of heart regarding that behavior. The TRA assumes that attitude changes signify a re-evaluation of behaviors, while CDT emphasizes the flexibility of attitudes. Although both theories often yield similar empirical predictions, the TRA framework allows for an analysis of how prior experiences inform observed attitude changes. This makes it particularly useful for studies focused on gendered variability in the utility and experiences of family life-course events. Given the complexity of attitude formation, TRA provides a foundational framework for analyzing patterns of attitudinal change and potential gender effects.

Indeed, the process of attitude formation is intricate, heavily shaped by the socio-cultural context of a society. To fully comprehend this complexity, a micro-level analysis of social structures and systems is essential. Individual identity and perceptions significantly influence the relationships between partners and various aspects of marital status. Davis and Love (2017: 497) clarify this dynamic, stating, "Research shows that structural hierarchies manifest at the micro level through identity processes. In particular, those occupying higher positions of status and power are better able to define situations and verify identity meanings in relation to their less powerful and lower status counterparts" (Burke, Stets, and Cerven, 2007; Cast, 2003; Cast, Stets, and Burke, 1999; Stets and Harrod, 2004).

From an identity theory perspective (Burke and Stets, 2009), we can examine how social position influences identity changes. This examination involves assessing the effects of status on identity stability within individual interactions. Persistent identity instability serves as a critical mechanism of identity change (Burke, 2006). Thus, the findings from this study have implications for understanding how social structures affect enduring identity processes and pave the

way for longitudinal investigations into the subject. This topic is of significant sociological relevance, particularly regarding the various contexts in which status differences shape interpersonal interactions, such as within families, workplaces, educational settings, and everyday encounters among individuals of diverse races, genders, and social class positions (Davis and Love, 2017: 497).

Green, Valleriani, and Adam (2016) have conducted a sociological analysis of the social dimensions of marriage and family, with a particular focus on social norms. In the sociological literature on marriage and family, there has long been an emphasis on the weakening of the social norms that traditionally guide marriage (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 2002; Cherlin, 2004; Giddens, 1992; Gross, 2005; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001, cited in Green, Valleriani, and Adam, 2016, pp. 417-418). These social norms play a significant role in shaping individuals' decisions regarding marriage and marital status. In this context, Green, Valleriani, and Adam (2016 : 417-418) further elaborate:

In one of the most significant and widely cited works on changing relationship forms in the modern West, The Transformation of Intimacy (1992), Anthony Giddens emphasizes the late modern focus on equality between partners, as well as their mutual sexual and emotional satisfaction. He argues that the "pure relationship" has emerged in response to the historical decline of relationships primarily formed for procreation and economic stability. This new relationship model is based solely on the satisfaction of each partner's needs, existing only as long as it provides sufficient benefits for both individuals.

Thus, the pure relationship marks a shift away from marriages defined by law, tradition, and necessity, moving toward a more flexible dyadic form determined by the needs and interests of each partner. This transformation may reflect a broader historical trend toward individualization, where individuals-rather than the state or traditional structures of race and class-create their own goals and life arrangements as a reflexive achievement of the self (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, cited in Green, Valleriani, and Adam, 2016: 417-418). Across all societies, marriage and marital practices are often influenced by law, tradition, and evolving social norms and values. To fully understand the various dimensions of marriage, it is crucial to examine the different factors that contribute to changes in marital status.

Killewald (2016: 697) discusses how individuals engage with marriage and marital status, highlighting the significant transformations that occurred during the latter half of the twentieth century. Changes in women's employment, education, household labor time, marriage timing, divorce rates, and gender role attitudes (Bianchi *et al.*, 2012; Fitch and Ruggles, 2000; Goldin, 2006; Stevenson and Wolfers, 2007; Thornton and Young-DeMarco, 2001) have substantially altered the circumstances that either strengthen or weaken marriages (Killewald, 2016: 697). In this context, Killewald hypothesizes that the effects of financial characteristics-such as economic independence and financial strain-on divorce risk are likely to remain stable over time (p. 697). This perspective underscores the importance of economic factors as a critical determinant of marital dynamics, particularly regarding divorce risk. A strong economic position enables individuals to work independently without significant obstacles.

Killewald (2016) further posits that the gendered expectations of spouses have evolved across marital cohorts. Behaviors once viewed as deviant in earlier cohorts may become normalized in later ones. Specifically, she predicts that the norm of wives as homemakers has diminished in importance for marital stability, whereas the husband as breadwinner norm continues to be strong. Evaluating changes in the determinants of marital stability across different marriage cohorts acknowledges that marriage and its associated expectations are deeply embedded in broader, evolving gender structures (Risman, 2011: 697).

While Killewald (2016) focuses on the causes of divorce in relation to individuals' marital status, it is essential to recognize that numerous factors may contribute to divorce. However, Killewald emphasizes the role of financial considerations, stating:

Despite substantial research, empirical evidence linking money and work to divorce has been characterized as "inconclusive" (Sayer and Bianchi, 2000 : 910), "contradictory" (Dechter, 1992: 1), "mixed" (Brines and Joyner, 1999 : 338; Oppenheimer, 1997 : 442; South, 2001 : 226), and "inconsistent" (Ono, 1998 ; 675; Sayer *et al.*, 2011: 1990), with conclusions often deemed "elusive" (Rogers, 2004: 59). Consequently, identifying and understanding the true causes of divorce within any social context can be challenging. Nevertheless, researchers continue to explore the underlying reasons for divorce among individuals.

6. Analytical Framework of Marriage and Marital Status

Marriage is intended to establish a lifelong union between men and women. While most marriages do endure, some may end in divorce or separation, an outcome that is generally unexpected. Patterns of divorce and separation, however, vary across different times and places. Divorce conceptually occurs when at least one partner believes that they would be better off apart than remaining married. The likelihood of divorce is influenced by the perceived benefits of marriage (Becker, Landes, and Michael, 1977). Killewald (2016: 697) elaborates on the theoretical foundation of marriage partnerships and their related aspects as follows:

The economic independence perspective posits that divorce rates rise when partners are less financially dependent on each other, which allows spouses to leave unhappy marriages (Ruggles, 1997; Sayer et al., 2011; Schoen et al., 2002). Wives are often more economically reliant on their husbands if they have less work experience. However, economic independence is also contingent upon other factors influencing women's earning potential, such as education, occupation, child support policies, and government assistance for low-income families.

Evidence supporting the economic independence perspective among couples in the United States is mixed. While some researchers find support for this perspective (Dechter, 1992; Heckert, Nowak, and Snyder, 1998; Ruggles, 1997; Sayer et al., 2011; Schoen et al., 2002; South, 2001; Teachman, 2010), others do not (Rogers and DeBoer, 2001; Sayer and Bianchi, 2000). Furthermore, although it has received less attention, this perspective suggests that men's divorce decisions are also influenced by their anticipated economic stability post-divorce (noted in Sayer et al., 2011 : 1987, cited in Killewald, 2016: 697).

Roth and Dashper (2016: NP7-NP8) discuss marriage practices and marital status in relation to gender, emphasizing women's experiences from a feminist perspective. They reference Ramazanoglu (1989), who critiques the notion of a singular "feminist standpoint", acknowledging the diverse experiences of women influenced by race, class, marital and parental status, age, and sexuality. This recognition highlights the significance of intersectionality in feminist discourse. Ramazanoglu (1989: 440) concludes that understanding how experiences are shaped by material conditions enhances the production of scientific knowledge, asserting that "*feminism can improve on male-centered sociology*".

The fundamental features of individuals, including attitudes and behaviors, are socially constructed through the lens of gender. As noted by Roth and Dashper (2016), women's experiences with marriage and marital status are significantly influenced by gender, which is a critical social structure. Consequently, discussions surrounding individual attitudes and behaviors must be contextualized within the social and cultural backgrounds of individuals, including ethnic and gender identities.

7. Patterns of Marital Practices in Nepal

In Nepal, Nakarmi (2021) discusses the Newari community, where socio-economic background significantly affects cultural practices and resource access. Due to occupational and cultural differences, Newari caste groups experience unequal access to education, employment, and other resources, often stratified by gender. This socioeconomic stratification influences marriage practices across class and ethnicity in Nepal, as argued by Pandey (2010) and Gautam (2017). Access to education, employment, and healthcare is largely determined by economic class, with wealthier groups enjoying greater access to these resources. This disparity, in turn, influences social and cultural norms around marriage—such as the age at marriage, likelihood of divorce, and separation rates. However, social and cultural practices also shape marriage and marital status in their own distinct ways.

Age is a key factor influencing marriage practices worldwide, including in Nepal. As children reach adolescence, discussions about marriage often begin within their families. According to the Nepal Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) 2022, the “age at first marriage” is defined as the age when an individual begins living with their first spouse or partner. Marital patterns are diverse and influenced by factors such as ethnicity.

NDHS (2022: 95) reports a significant decline in adolescent marriage rates. The proportion of women aged 15-19 who are currently married has dropped from 43% in 1996 to 27% in 2016, and further to 21% in 2022, indicating a shift toward delayed marriage for young women. Similarly, the percentage of women aged 20-24 who are married has decreased from 84% in 1996 to 75% in 2016, reaching 68% in 2022.

Education is also a critical factor in marriage timing. Among women aged 25-49, those with secondary education marry, on

average, 3.6 years later than those with no education (20.5 years versus 16.9 years). Men with a secondary education marry approximately four years later than those without any education (23.8 years versus 19.8 years). The median age at first marriage varies by ethnic background as well (Table-1).

Table-1: Median Age at First Marriage by Ethnic Group

Ethnic group	Women age		Men age
	20-49	25-49	25-49
Brahmin/Chhetri	19.4	19.1	23.4
Dalit	17.2	17.0	20.1
Janajati	19.5	19.2	22.9
Madhesi	17.2	16.9	21.8
Muslim	16.8	16.5	20.4

Source: MOHP (2023), NDHS (2022)

The NDHS (2022: 95) highlights significant variation in the median age at first marriage among women aged 25-49 across ethnic groups and regions in Nepal. Women from the Muslim ethnic group have the lowest median age at first marriage (16.5 years), while Janajati women have the highest (19.2 years). Regionally, women in Madhesh Province marry at a median age of 16.6 years, compared to 19.9 years in Bagmati Province. For men, the median age at first marriage is lowest in Karnali Province (20.3 years) and highest in Bagmati Province (23.8 years) (NDHS, 2022: 95-96).

Similar trends appear in the age of first sexual intercourse. According to NDHS (2022 : 96), the median age at first sexual intercourse for women aged 25-49 is 18.3 years, compared to 20.7 years for men, suggesting that women engage in sexual intercourse 2.4 years earlier on average, largely due to earlier marriage. Nine percent of women had their first sexual intercourse by age 15, compared to only 2% of men. By age 18, 47% of women and 21% of men had engaged in sexual intercourse, and by age 25, 91% of women and 78% of men had done so (NDHS, 2022: 96).

Interestingly, among men, the median age at first sexual intercourse (20.7 years) occurs 1.6 years earlier than the median age at first marriage (22.3 years), indicating that men are more likely to engage in sexual activity before marriage. In contrast, for women, the median ages for first marriage and first sexual intercourse are the same (18.3 years), suggesting that marriage and sexual initiation often coincide for women (NDHS, 2022: 96).

While marriage and sexual initiation are often correlated, recent patterns in Nepal show considerable diversity. The NDHS monitors these trends, documenting variations across demographic groups, including ethnicity. Table-2 illustrates the median age at first sexual intercourse across ethnic groups.

According to NDHS (2022: 96-97), the median age at first sexual intercourse for women is highest among Brahman/Chhetri (19.1 years) and Janajati (19.2 years) groups, while it is lowest among Madheshi women (17 years), followed closely by Dalit women (17.1 years). For men, the Brahman/Chhetri group also has the highest median age (21.9 years), followed by Madheshi men (20.7 years). The lowest median ages are found among Dalit men (19.3 years) and Janajati men (20.5 years). These findings reveal substantial differences in the age of first sexual intercourse across Nepal's ethnic groups.

Table-2: Median Age at First Sexual Intercourse by Ethnic Group

Ethnic group	Women age		Men age
	20-49	25-49	25-49
Brahmin/Chhetri	19.3	19.1	21.9
Dalit	17.3	17.1	19.3
Janajati	19.4	19.2	20.5
Madhesi	17.2	17.0	20.7
Muslim	16.9	16.5	20.1

Source: MOHP (2023), NDHS (2022)

According to the Nepal DHS (2022), 48% of women and 54% of men aged 15-49 reported having had sexual intercourse in the four weeks prior to the survey. Additionally, 21% of women and 25% of men in this age range reported never having had sexual intercourse. Trends show that the proportion of women reporting recent sexual activity has remained steady since the previous survey, while the proportion of men reporting sexual activity in the past four weeks has declined from 61% in 2016 to 54% in 2022 (NDHS, 2022).

The NDHS (2022: 96-97) report also reveals patterns of sexual activity based on various background characteristics. For instance, only 6% of men aged 15-19 were sexually active in the past four weeks, compared with 13% of women in the same age group. Among men who have never married, 31% reported having had sexual intercourse at some point, with only 5% reporting recent sexual

activity in the past four weeks. In contrast, only 3% of never-married women reported ever having had sexual intercourse.

Marital duration also influences sexual activity. Thirty-seven percent of currently married women did not engage in sexual intercourse in the four weeks prior to the survey. Women married for 1-4 years (58%) and those married for 5-9 years (59%) were less likely to have been sexually active in the preceding four weeks compared to those married for under a year (68%) or for over ten years (65% or more) (NDHS, 2022: 96).

These findings indicate that various aspects of marriage and marital status are associated with background characteristics, such as age, education, gender, and ethnicity. However, in this paper, only marital status in relation to ethnic background is discussed.

8. Ethnicity, Marital Status and Changes in Nepal

As in Nepal and other countries around the world, marriage was a central focus in debates over women's rights in nineteenth-century Britain (Richardson, 2016). Discussions on marriage vary widely across cultures; however, recent discourse has increasingly focused on gender. Richardson (2016: 177) notes, *"The gendered and classed notions of equality limited extensions of the political franchise to middle-class men, restricted women's rights within marriage, and denied them access to higher education"*. Women's participation in professions was also severely limited and scrutinized, which shaped views on marriage and the roles of men and women within it. Influential critics, including John Ruskin and John Stuart Mill, challenged these limitations, reshaping expectations among educated and professional elites (Richardson, 2016).

The marital status of the population aged ten years and above was reported in the 2021 census (NSO, 2023). According to this data, 33.1 percent of the population in this age group has never been married. Breaking this down by sex, 38.2 percent of males and 28.4 percent of females aged ten years or older are unmarried. Additionally, 61.8 percent of the population in this age group is married, while 4.5 percent are widowed. Among males, 59.1 percent are married, compared to 64.3 percent of females in the same age group (NSO, 2023).

The 2021 population census (NSO, 2023) also provides data on age at first marriage. It indicates that 34.4 percent of the ever-married population aged ten years and above married for the first time

between the ages of 18 and 20 (with 32.6 percent of males and 35.9 percent of females). Additionally, 22.3 percent were first married between ages 15 and 17 (12.3 percent of males and 30.4 percent of females), while 7 percent were first married at ages 10-14 (3.0 percent of males and 10.2 percent of females). A small percentage (0.3 percent) were married for the first time before reaching the age of ten. Overall, the median age at first marriage is 19 years, with a median of 21 years for males and 18 years for females (NSO, 2023).

Marriage, however, is influenced by a complex interplay of factors, including gender, ethnicity, and education. Today, ethnicity plays an increasingly prominent role in discussions about individual attitudes and behaviors. In Nepal, marriage and marital status are evolving in response to global influences, such as international migration. Nevertheless, ethnic background remains a significant factor in shaping individual attitudes, given that each ethnic group possesses its own distinct culture and traditions. These cultural variations among ethnic groups influence marriage and marital status, as shown in Table-3.

Table-3: Ethnicity and Marital Status in Nepal (N=14734)

Ethnicity	Marital Status (In percentage)					Total
	Married	Divorced	Separated	Widow/ Widower	Never Married	
Hill Caste	55.9	0.4	0.6	5.6	37.5	100.0
Madhesh/ Tarai Caste	70.6	0.0	0.2	6.0	23.2	100.0
Mountain/H ill Janajati	54.4	0.1	0.6	5.6	39.3	100.0
Madhesh/ Tarai Janajati	63.9	0.7	0.3	3.9	31.2	100.0
Hill Dalit	58.8	0.0	0.6	4.7	35.9	100.0
Religious/ Linguistic Group	69.0	0.2	0.1	6.3	24.5	100.0
Others	64.2	0.2	0.2	6.1	29.2	100.0
Total	59.8	0.3	0.4	5.6	33.9	100.0

Source: Computed by the researcher based on NLSS-I: 1995/96 data sets;
Note: The results obtained and presented in the table are weighted by individual weights.

The practices of divorce, separation, and other aspects of marital status vary significantly based on the cultural backgrounds of individuals associated with specific ethnic groups (Table-3). In Nepal's first Living Standards Survey (NLSS) of 1995/96, data on divorce and separation practices were collected. According to this survey, the divorce rate was highest among the Madhesh/Tarai Janajati (0.7%), followed by the Hill Caste group (0.4%). The separation rate was highest among Hill/Mountain Janajati (0.6%), Hill Caste (0.6%), and Hill Dalit (0.6%). Notably, no cases of divorce were recorded among the Madhesh/Tarai Caste and Hill Dalit groups in 1995/96. Divorce rates were lower among the religious/linguistic group (0.2%) and Hill/Mountain Janajati (0.1%), while separation rates were also low among the Madhesh/Tarai Caste group (0.2%) and the religious group (0.1%). These findings suggest that marital practices, including divorce and separation, differ by ethnic background and may be associated with cultural influences.

A Chi-Square test of independence revealed a significant result ($\chi^2 = 157.619, p < 0.01$), providing sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis of no association between ethnicity and marital status. This supports the research hypothesis that ethnicity and marital status are indeed associated. These findings suggest that the diverse cultural backgrounds of ethnic groups influence marital practices, shaping aspects of marriage and marital status in Nepal.

The 2022 Nepal Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) reports that polygyny-the practice of having multiple wives-persists in Nepal, though it has declined over time. In the survey, women who report that their husband or partner has other wives are considered to be in a polygynous marriage. Among currently married women aged 15-49, 2% reported having co-wives, while 1% of men indicated they had more than one wife. Trends show a decrease in polygyny: the percentage of married women aged 15-49 with co-wives dropped from 6% in 1996 to 4% in 2016, reaching 2% in 2022 (NDHS, 2022).

Patterns of polygyny vary by age, ethnicity, and cultural background. According to the NDHS (2022), polygyny is more prevalent among older age groups; 4% of women aged 40-44 report co-wives, compared to less than 1% of women aged 15-19. Men aged 40-44 are also more likely to have multiple wives (3%). Among ethnic groups, Brahmin/Chhetri women report the highest rate of polygyny (3%), while Madhesi women report the lowest (1%) (NDHS, 2022).

Table-4: Ethnicity and Marital Status in Nepal (N=22360)

Ethnicity	Marital Status (In percentage)							Total
	Never married	Single married	Poly married	Re-married	Widow/ widower	Divorced	Separated	
Hill Caste	36.4	53.4	1.0	3.3	5.2	0.2	0.5	100.0
Madhesh/ Tarai Caste	29.8	62.5	0.3	2.8	4.6	0.0	0.1	100.0
Hill/ Mountain Janajati	37.8	50.9	1.0	4.1	5.1	0.4	0.6	100.0
Tarai Janajati	37.4	55.5	0.7	2.0	4.3	0.0	0.1	100.0
Hill Dalit	38.2	49.4	1.0	5.8	4.9	0.2	0.4	100.0
Madhesh/ Tarai Dalit	29.6	60.7	0.3	2.7	6.0	0.3	0.3	100.0
Religious/ Linguistic Group	37.7	54.7	1.4	1.4	4.2	0.1	0.4	100.0
Others	31.8	59.7	0.0	1.4	7.2	0.0	0.0	100.0
Total	35.6	54.5	0.8	3.4	5.0	0.2	0.4	100.0
Pearson Chi-Square=187.600 (1628981.817), df= 42, $p=0.000$ (Sig. 2-sided), $\phi=0.01$								

Source: NLSS-II: 2010/11 (Computed by the researcher);

Note: The results obtained and presented in the table are weighted by individual weights..

Provincial differences are also evident: the percentage of women with co-wives is highest in Sudurpashchim Province (5%) and lowest in Madhesh Province (1%). Education level influences polygyny rates as well. Among women, 3% of those with no education have co-wives, compared to only 1% of women with more than a secondary education. For men, those with no or basic education are more likely to have multiple wives (1% and 2%, respectively), while men with higher education show nearly no polygynous practices (0%) (NDHS, 2022).

Overall, marriage practices in Nepal appear to be shaped by cultural, ethnic, and educational factors. Table-5 shows the marital status of individuals across ethnic groups of Nepal. The results in the this table indicate that the divorce rate is higher among the Hill/Mountain Janajati group (0.4%) compared to other ethnic groups in Nepal. This rate is twice that of the Hill Caste group (0.2%)

and four times higher than that of the religious/ linguistic groups (0.1%). The divorce rate for Hill/Mountain Janajati is comparable to that of the Tarai Janajati and Hill Dalit groups, both at 0.3%. Interestingly, there is no recorded divorce rate among the Madhesh/Tarai Caste and Madhesh/Tarai Dalit groups.

Table-5: Ethnicity and Marital Status in Nepal (N=38951)

Ethnicity	Marital Status (In percentage)					Total
	Never Married	Married	Widow/ Widower	Divorced	Separated	
Hill Caste	33.4	60.3	5.1	0.2	0.9	100.0
Madhesh/ Tarai Caste	34.0	61.1	4.5	0.0	0.3	100.0
Hill/Mountain Janajati	34.0	59.6	4.9	0.4	1.0	100.0
Tarai Janajati	31.1	62.5	5.4	0.3	0.6	100.0
Hill Dalit	34.1	59.4	4.3	0.3	1.9	100.0
Madhesh/ Tarai Dalit	33.0	60.7	5.9	0.0	0.5	100.0
Religious/ Linguistic Group	38.9	56.4	4.2	0.1	0.4	100.0
Others	36.6	63.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0
Total	33.7	60.3	4.9	0.2	0.9	100.0
Pearson Chi-Square= 102.617 (589416.276), df= 28, p=0.000 (Sig. 2-sided), ϕ^2 =0.01						

Source: NLSS-IV: 2022/ 23 (Computed by the researcher); Note: The results obtained and presented in the table are weighted by individual weights.

Separation practices also vary significantly across ethnic groups (see Table-5). The separation rate is highest among Hill Dalits (1.9%), surpassing all other groups, including Madhesh/Tarai Dalits (0.5%). The rate of living separately is also relatively high among Hill/Mountain Janajati (1.0%) and Hill Caste individuals (0.9%), which is second only to Hill Dalits. In contrast, the rate of separation is lowest among the Madhesh/Tarai Caste group (0.3%), followed by the religious/linguistic group (0.4%).

These findings suggest that marital practices, including divorce and separation, vary by ethnic group, indicating a possible association with the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of individuals.

The Chi-Square test yielded a significant result ($\chi^2 = 102.617, p < 0.01$), providing sufficient evidence to support the hypothesis that

there is an association between ethnicity and marital practices in Nepal. This evidence suggests that marital practices among individuals differ according to their ethnic backgrounds.

The percentage of married individuals in each survey remains around 60%. Among the married, the rates of divorce and separation show slight variation over time. The divorce rate decreased from 0.3% in 1995/96 to 0.2% in 2010/11. Meanwhile, the separation rate held steady at 0.4% in both 1995/96 and 2010/11. Notably, the separation rate rose significantly to 0.9% in 2022/23-more than double the 0.4% rate in 2010/11. By contrast, the divorce rate remained at 0.2% in 2022/23, consistent with 2010/11.

Despite these percentages, court records and local practices indicate a general increase in divorce cases. Marital status trends-including increases, stability, and declines-vary across different ethnic groups in Nepal, reflecting a complex pattern of change over time.

9. Discussion

Mo (2016) presents compelling arguments, noting that while prior theories of divorce may have had limited scopes, they established a theoretical foundation upon which subsequent empirical studies were built. These studies highlighted significant factors influencing divorce rates from an empirical perspective. Mo (2016) identifies key variables for future studies on divorce at both the macro and individual levels. At the macro level, these include national income (GDP per capita), unemployment rates, women's educational attainment, and general fertility rates. At the individual level, important variables include personal income, educational level by race and gender, women's working hours and income, and the number of children.

In the context of this research, findings indicate that marital status varies significantly across ethnic groups, with a proven association between ethnicity and marital status across all three rounds of the NLSS survey. Percent distribution of women and men age 15-49 by current marital status, by age, given in Nepal DHS (2022) report as Never married (36%) Married or living together (63.1%), Divorced (0.2%), Separated (0.3%) and Widowed (0.3%) which is similar to NLSS results. This aligns closely with Mo's (2016) argument that an individual's socioeconomic background is a critical factor in divorce outcomes. The Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS, now NSO, 2023)

reported a divorce rate of 1.2 per 1,000 married couples in Nepal for 2019. This means that, on average, only one couple per 1,000 married couples divorced, indicating a relatively low divorce rate compared to other countries.

Additionally, previous studies suggest that research on the influence of socioeconomic factors on divorce has primarily focused on Western countries, with limited research on divorce theories and trends in non-Western contexts-especially in some Asian countries, due to data limitations (Mo, 2016). Mo raises thought-provoking questions about whether divorce theories from Western countries are applicable in Asian contexts or whether Asian countries might follow unique family theories shaped by their distinct cultural values. Furthermore, Mo questions whether Asian countries will exhibit similar divorce trends as Western nations during periods of rapid economic transformation.

10. Conclusions

Over the last two to three decades, Nepali society has undergone rapid changes in various areas, particularly in marriage and family structures. Traditional marriage practices are increasingly giving way to modern approaches, especially in the rise of love marriages and inter-caste unions. Despite these shifts, the overall pattern of marriage remains largely similar, though slight generational changes are emerging in divorce and separation trends. These changes in marital status vary across Nepal's diverse ethnic groups.

Findings from three surveys show that the divorce rate is higher among the Hill/Mountain Janajati group compared to other ethnic groups in Nepal. This rate is twice as high as that of the Hill Caste group and also exceeds the rate observed in religious/linguistic groups. Divorce rates for the Hill/Mountain Janajati group are comparable to those of the Tarai Janajati and Hill Dalit groups. Notably, there is no recorded divorce rate among the Madhesh/Tarai Caste and Madhesh/Tarai Dalit groups.

Separation rates also vary considerably across ethnic lines. Hill Dalits exhibit the highest separation rate, surpassing all other groups, including Madhesh/Tarai Dalits. The rate of individuals living separately is also relatively high among Hill/Mountain Janajati and Hill Caste groups, second only to Hill Dalits. In contrast, the Madhesh/Tarai Caste group has the lowest separation rate, followed by the religious/linguistic groups.

These findings suggest that marital practices, including divorce and separation, vary significantly across ethnic groups, indicating a potential link between marital patterns and the ethnic or cultural backgrounds of individuals.

Chi-Square test yielded significant results, providing strong evidence to support the hypothesis that there is an association between ethnicity and marital practices in Nepal. This suggests that marital behaviors among individuals are influenced by their ethnic backgrounds.

This research explores the relationship between cultural background-specifically ethnicity-and marital status, revealing notable variations in marital status across different ethnic groups. This suggests a significant association between ethnicity and marital status, as supported by various sociological and socio-psychological theories articulated by scholars such as Andersson (2016), Davis and Love (2017), Green, Valleriani, and Adam (2016), Killewald (2016), Roth and Dashper (2016), and Mishra (2010), among others, in the context of Giddens and other sociologists.

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Reshaping Governance Ethics in India: The Need for Reform

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Abstract

Governance ethics in India has faced significant scrutiny due to issues such as corruption, nepotism and inefficient bureaucratic processes, which undermine public trust and hinder effective policy implementation. The study begins with a historical overview of governance practices in India, tracing the evolution of ethical standards and their impact on administration. It then examines current ethical dilemmas within various levels of government. This paper delves into the pressing issue of governance ethics in India, exploring the systemic challenges and proposing comprehensive reforms necessary to enhance transparency, accountability, and integrity within the Indian administrative framework. The paper proposes a multi-faceted approach to reform, emphasizing the adoption of robust anti-corruption laws, the establishment of independent oversight bodies, and the promotion of ethical education and training for public officials. Furthermore, it explores the role of technology in enhancing transparency and accountability, including the use of e-governance tools and digital platforms for citizen engagement.

Keywords

Governance ethics, Transparency, Accountability, E-Governance, Reform strategies, Democratic institutions, Digital governance.

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Reshaping Governance Ethics in India: The Need for Reform

1. Introduction

Governance ethics is a critical pillar of any democratic society. It encompasses the principles of integrity, transparency, accountability, and fairness, which are essential for maintaining public trust and ensuring the effective functioning of government institutions. In India, the discourse on governance ethics has gained prominence in recent decades, particularly in light of numerous high-profile corruption scandals and the increasing demand for clean and accountable governance. As India aspires to become a global leader, the need for reforming governance ethics is more urgent than ever. The roots of governance ethics in India can be traced back to ancient times when the principles of dharma (righteousness) and raj dharma (duty of rulers) were integral to the functioning of kingdoms and empires. Ancient Indian texts like the *Arthashastra*, authored by Chanakya, emphasized the importance of ethical governance, advising rulers to act in the best interests of their subjects and uphold justice. However, the advent of colonial rule and subsequent developments in the post-independence era brought about significant changes in the governance landscape.¹ In the early years following independence, India's leaders, such as Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, envisioned a governance system rooted in ethical principles.² However, the political and administrative challenges of a newly independent nation, coupled with the complex socio-economic realities, led to the gradual erosion of ethical standards in governance. Over time, issues such as corruption, nepotism, and lack of accountability became entrenched in the political and bureaucratic systems, undermining the principles of ethical governance.³

2. Relevance of Governance

Governance is central to the effective functioning of any society, as it encompasses the processes and structures through which power and authority are exercised. At its core, governance defines how decisions are made, how policies are implemented, and how public

resources are allocated. In democratic societies, governance ensures that the needs and aspirations of the people are addressed in a fair and transparent manner. The principles of governance, including accountability, transparency, and responsiveness, are crucial for fostering public trust and ensuring that government actions align with the collective interests of the society. Effective governance mechanisms facilitate the smooth functioning of institutions, promote social justice, and enhance the quality of life for citizens.⁴ In the context of economic development, governance plays a pivotal role in shaping the growth trajectory of a nation. Strong governance frameworks are essential for creating a conducive environment for investment, innovation, and sustainable development. By upholding the rule of law, enforcing property rights, and combating corruption, governance mechanisms contribute to economic stability and attract both domestic and foreign investments.⁵ Moreover, good governance ensures that economic benefits are distributed equitably, addressing issues of inequality and ensuring that growth is inclusive. The ability to design and implement effective economic policies, manage public resources efficiently, and adapt to changing economic conditions is fundamentally linked to the quality of governance. Furthermore, governance is integral to addressing contemporary global challenges such as climate change, public health crises, and social inequality.⁶ Effective governance structures enable governments to respond to these challenges with appropriate policies and coordinated actions. For instance, in the face of climate change, governance frameworks that promote environmental sustainability, enforce regulations, and encourage international cooperation are vital for mitigating its impact. Similarly, during public health emergencies, governance systems must be agile and responsive to manage resources, disseminate information, and implement preventive measures. The relevance of governance extends beyond national boundaries, as global issues require collaborative governance approaches that involve multiple stakeholders and international institutions. Thus, the strength and integrity of governance systems are crucial for addressing both domestic and global challenges and ensuring the well-being of current and future generations.

3. Challenges to Governance Ethics in India

Corruption and Nepotism: One of the most pressing challenges to governance ethics in India is the pervasive issue of corruption.

Corruption undermines the integrity of public institutions by allowing personal gain to supersede public interest. It manifests in various forms, including bribery, kickbacks, and nepotism, where public officials use their positions to favor relatives and friends.⁷ This erosion of ethical standards not only distorts decision-making processes but also hampers equitable distribution of resources and services. Despite numerous anti-corruption measures and the presence of institutions like the Central Vigilance Commission, entrenched corruption networks continue to undermine governance.⁸ The challenge is further exacerbated by the lack of accountability and transparency in many administrative processes, making it difficult to combat corruption effectively. Promoting ethical leadership is vital for driving cultural change within governance institutions. Reforms should focus on developing and implementing training programs for public officials that emphasize ethical behaviour, integrity, and leadership principles. By fostering a culture of ethical leadership, reforms can encourage officials to set a positive example and uphold high standards of conduct. Leadership training and development programs can also help build the capacity of public officials to make ethical decisions and navigate complex governance challenges effectively. Reforms are crucial for strengthening the integrity of governance institutions and ensuring their independence from political and external pressures. Political interference in administrative matters undermines the neutrality and effectiveness of public institutions, compromising ethical standards. Reforms should focus on safeguarding the independence of institutions such as the judiciary, anti-corruption agencies, and regulatory bodies. This includes implementing measures to prevent undue political influence, ensuring fair appointments, and providing adequate resources and support for these institutions. By reinforcing institutional integrity, reforms can help maintain a higher standard of ethical conduct and ensure that governance practices are fair and impartial.⁹

Bureaucratic Red Tape and Inefficiency: The Indian bureaucratic system, with its complex layers of regulations and procedures, often struggles with inefficiency and a lack of responsiveness. Bureaucratic red tape can lead to delays in policy implementation and obstruct the delivery of essential services. This inefficiency not only affects the quality of governance but also breeds frustration among citizens who face prolonged wait times for

services and approvals.¹⁰ The challenge of streamlining bureaucratic processes and ensuring that officials adhere to ethical standards is compounded by the sheer scale of India's administrative machinery. Efforts to reform the bureaucracy face resistance due to entrenched interests and the inertia of established practices. The inefficiencies and red tape associated with India's bureaucratic system highlight the need for comprehensive administrative reforms.¹¹ Complex procedures and outdated practices can delay decision-making and obstruct the delivery of essential services. Reforms should aim to simplify bureaucratic processes, reduce unnecessary regulations, and implement digital solutions to streamline administrative functions. By adopting technology-driven approaches and improving organizational efficiency, reforms can enhance the responsiveness of government institutions and reduce opportunities for corruption. Streamlined processes not only improve service delivery but also contribute to a more ethical and accountable governance framework.¹²

Political Interference and Lack of Accountability: Political interference in administrative matters can severely undermine governance ethics in India. When political leaders exert undue influence over bureaucratic decisions, it compromises the neutrality and effectiveness of public administration.¹³ This interference often results in biased decision-making, favoring political allies or personal interests over public welfare. Additionally, the lack of effective mechanisms for holding public officials accountable further exacerbates this issue. Despite the existence of various oversight bodies, there is often a gap between the legal framework for accountability and its actual enforcement. The challenge lies in strengthening institutional mechanisms to ensure that officials are held accountable for unethical behaviour and that political influence does not compromise the integrity of governance. The need for reforms in governance ethics in India is underscored by the pressing requirement to enhance accountability and transparency in public administration. The current systems often lack effective mechanisms for holding officials accountable for their actions, leading to a culture of impunity. Reforms should focus on strengthening oversight bodies, implementing rigorous auditing practices, and ensuring that public officials are held accountable for unethical behaviour. Transparency can be improved through measures such as open data initiatives, where government transactions and decisions are made accessible to

the public. By fostering a culture of openness and accountability, reforms can help rebuild public trust in government institutions and ensure that resources are used efficiently and ethically.¹⁴

Inadequate Whistleblower Protection: Whistleblowers play a crucial role in exposing unethical practices and corruption within public institutions. However, in India, whistleblowers often face significant risks, including threats to their safety, career repercussions, and social ostracism.¹⁵ The lack of adequate protection for whistleblowers deters many individuals from reporting misconduct, allowing unethical practices to persist unchecked. Although there are legal provisions for whistleblower protection, their implementation is often weak and ineffective. Strengthening legal protections and creating a safe environment for whistleblowers are essential for fostering a culture of transparency and accountability.¹⁶ The protection of whistleblowers is a critical area requiring reform, as it plays a key role in exposing corruption and unethical practices within government institutions. The current lack of adequate protection for whistleblowers deters individuals from reporting misconduct due to fears of retaliation and personal risk. Reforms should focus on strengthening legal protections for whistleblowers, creating secure channels for reporting wrongdoing, and ensuring that whistleblowers are shielded from retaliation.¹⁷ Effective whistleblower protection not only encourages the reporting of unethical behaviour but also contributes to a culture of transparency and accountability within public administration.

Lack of Public Awareness and Engagement: Effective governance requires active public engagement and awareness of ethical standards. In India, there is often a lack of awareness among citizens regarding their rights and the mechanisms available for addressing grievances.¹⁸ This gap in knowledge can lead to lower levels of public participation in governance processes and a lack of pressure on officials to adhere to ethical standards. Building public awareness through education and outreach programs is crucial for empowering citizens to hold their leaders accountable and participate actively in governance. Enhancing public participation and awareness is essential for fostering a culture of ethical governance. Reforms should aim to increase citizen engagement in governance processes through mechanisms such as public consultations, participatory budgeting, and accessible grievance redressal systems.¹⁹ Additionally, raising public awareness about rights,

responsibilities, and available mechanisms for addressing grievances can empower citizens to actively participate in governance and hold officials accountable. By involving citizens more effectively in the governance process and educating them about ethical standards, reforms can strengthen the democratic process and improve governance outcomes.²⁰

Complexity of Legal and Regulatory Frameworks: The complexity and frequent changes in legal and regulatory frameworks can pose a challenge to governance ethics. Officials and institutions may find it difficult to keep up with evolving regulations, leading to inconsistencies and potential lapses in ethical standards.²¹ The legal system's complexity can also create opportunities for exploitation and manipulation, undermining the effectiveness of governance. Simplifying and streamlining legal and regulatory frameworks can help reduce ambiguity and enhance compliance with ethical standards. The complexity and frequent changes in legal and regulatory frameworks can pose challenges to ethical governance.²² Reforms should focus on simplifying and modernizing legal structures to reduce ambiguity and enhance compliance. This includes revising outdated regulations, streamlining legal procedures, and ensuring that laws are clear and enforceable. By creating a more coherent and accessible legal framework, reforms can help reduce opportunities for exploitation and manipulation, thereby supporting a more ethical and effective governance system.²³

Strengthening the Right to Information (RTI) Act: The Right to Information (RTI) Act of India, enacted in 2005, is a landmark piece of legislation designed to promote transparency and accountability in public governance by providing citizens with the right to access information held by public authorities.²⁴ However, despite its significant potential to empower citizens and improve governance, the implementation of the RTI Act has faced various challenges that undermine its effectiveness. Strengthening the RTI Act is crucial for ensuring that its principles of openness and accountability are fully realized. Key areas for reform include improving the responsiveness of public authorities, enhancing the accessibility of information, and ensuring the effective enforcement of the Act's provisions.²⁵ One of the primary challenges faced by the RTI Act is the delay in responses and non-compliance by public authorities. Many requests for information are either not answered within the stipulated time frame or are met with evasive or incomplete responses. To address this

issue, reforms should focus on enforcing strict timelines for responding to RTI requests and imposing penalties for non-compliance. This could involve establishing a more rigorous monitoring system to track the timeliness and quality of responses. Additionally, improving training and capacity-building programs for public officials on RTI compliance can help ensure that they understand their responsibilities and the importance of timely and accurate information disclosure.

Enhancing the accessibility of information is another critical area for strengthening the RTI Act. While the Act mandates that information should be provided in an accessible format, many public authorities still fail to adhere to this requirement. Reforms should focus on creating user-friendly mechanisms for accessing information, including the development of online portals and digital platforms where citizens can easily submit RTI requests and receive information.²⁶ Ensuring that these platforms are well-maintained, secure, and accessible to all, including marginalized and disabled groups, is essential for making the RTI Act more effective. Additionally, public awareness campaigns can help educate citizens about their rights under the RTI Act and how to utilize the available mechanisms to access information. The effective enforcement of the RTI Act's provisions is crucial for its success. Despite having a legal framework in place, the enforcement of RTI-related decisions and orders can be inconsistent. To strengthen enforcement, reforms should focus on establishing independent and empowered Information Commissions that have the authority to address grievances, impose sanctions, and ensure compliance.²⁷ These commissions should be adequately funded and staffed to handle the increasing volume of RTI requests and appeals. Furthermore, creating a clear and efficient process for filing complaints and seeking redressal can enhance the Act's effectiveness and provide a robust mechanism for addressing violations.²⁸

Finally, periodic reviews and updates to the RTI Act are necessary to adapt to evolving needs and technological advancements. The legal framework should be revisited to address emerging challenges, such as the increasing complexity of information management and the need for data protection. Incorporating provisions that address new forms of information access and digital transparency can ensure that the RTI Act remains relevant and effective. Engaging with stakeholders, including civil

society organizations, legal experts, and public officials, in the review process can provide valuable insights and help shape reforms that enhance the Act's impact on governance and public accountability.²⁹ In summary, strengthening the Right to Information Act involves addressing delays in responses, improving the accessibility of information, ensuring effective enforcement, and adapting the legal framework to contemporary challenges. By focusing on these areas, reforms can enhance the RTI Act's ability to promote transparency, accountability, and citizen engagement in governance, ultimately contributing to more ethical and responsive public administration.³⁰

Strengthening Anti-Corruption Laws: Strengthening anti-corruption laws is crucial for combating corruption effectively and ensuring ethical governance. Corruption undermines public trust, distorts economic and social development, and erodes the integrity of public institutions.³¹ To address these issues comprehensively, anti-corruption laws must be robust, clear, and rigorously enforced. Key areas for reform include enhancing legal definitions of corruption, expanding the scope of anti-corruption measures, and improving the enforcement mechanisms to ensure that laws translate into tangible outcomes. Firstly, refining the legal definitions of corruption is essential for improving the clarity and effectiveness of anti-corruption laws. Many existing anti-corruption statutes suffer from vague or outdated definitions that can lead to loopholes and inconsistent application.³²

Reforms should aim to provide precise and comprehensive definitions of various forms of corruption, including bribery, embezzlement, nepotism, and conflict of interest. This clarity will help ensure that all forms of corrupt practices are adequately addressed and that legal provisions are effectively applied.³³ Additionally, incorporating international standards and best practices into domestic legislation can help align anti-corruption efforts with global norms and enhance their effectiveness. Secondly, expanding the scope of anti-corruption measures is critical for addressing new and emerging forms of corruption. Traditional anti-corruption laws often focus on direct financial transactions and bribery, but modern corruption schemes can involve complex financial instruments, cross-border transactions, and digital platforms.³⁴ Reforms should introduce measures to tackle these evolving forms of corruption, such as enhancing regulations related to financial disclosures, anti-money laundering, and cybersecurity.

By broadening the scope of anti-corruption laws to cover these new areas, governments can better address sophisticated corruption schemes and prevent illicit activities that may undermine governance.³⁵ Thirdly, improving enforcement mechanisms is vital for translating anti-corruption laws into effective action. Enforcement challenges, including inadequate resources, lack of coordination among agencies, and delays in legal proceedings, can undermine the impact of anti-corruption efforts. Reforms should focus on strengthening the capacity and independence of anti-corruption agencies, such as the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) and the Enforcement Directorate (ED), to ensure they have the authority, resources, and support needed to perform their roles effectively.³⁶ This includes providing training, investing in technology, and enhancing inter-agency collaboration to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of investigations and prosecutions. Finally, fostering a culture of transparency and accountability is crucial for supporting anti-corruption efforts. Legislative reforms should be complemented by initiatives to promote transparency in government operations, such as implementing open data policies, improving public procurement processes, and enhancing whistleblower protections.³⁷

Creating a supportive environment that encourages the reporting of corruption and holds public officials accountable is essential for ensuring that anti-corruption laws have a meaningful impact. Public awareness campaigns, education programs, and civil society engagement can play a significant role in building a culture of integrity and reducing tolerance for corrupt practices. In summary, strengthening anti-corruption laws involves refining legal definitions, expanding the scope of measures, improving enforcement mechanisms, and fostering a culture of transparency. By addressing these key areas, reforms can enhance the effectiveness of anti-corruption efforts, improve governance, and contribute to a more ethical and accountable public sector.³⁸

Enhancing Public Participation and Civic Engagement: Enhancing public participation and civic engagement is pivotal for fostering democratic governance, improving the quality of public decision-making, and ensuring that government actions reflect the needs and priorities of the populace. Active citizen involvement helps bridge the gap between government and society, leading to more responsive and effective governance. Key areas for enhancing

public participation and civic engagement include expanding mechanisms for public involvement, leveraging technology to facilitate engagement, and promoting civic education to empower citizens.³⁹

Firstly, expanding mechanisms for public involvement is essential for integrating citizen input into governance processes. Traditional methods of participation, such as public hearings and consultations, are valuable but often limited in scope and reach. Reforms should focus on creating and institutionalizing a range of participatory mechanisms, including participatory budgeting, citizen juries, and advisory councils. These mechanisms allow citizens to contribute directly to decision-making processes and provide valuable feedback on policies and projects. By broadening the avenues for public involvement, governments can ensure that diverse perspectives are considered and that policies are more attuned to the needs of different communities.⁴⁰

Secondly, leveraging technology can significantly enhance public participation and engagement. Digital platforms offer new opportunities for citizens to engage with government processes, access information, and voice their opinions. Online portals, social media, and mobile apps can be used to facilitate real-time interactions between citizens and public officials, making it easier for people to participate in consultations, track policy developments, and submit feedback. For instance, e-petitions and online surveys can gather broad input on specific issues, while digital town halls can enable discussions between elected representatives and their constituents. Ensuring that these digital tools are user-friendly, secure, and accessible to all, including marginalized and disabled populations, is crucial for maximizing their effectiveness.⁴¹

Thirdly, promoting civic education is fundamental for empowering citizens to actively participate in governance. Civic education programs that inform individuals about their rights, responsibilities, and the mechanisms available for participating in the democratic process can significantly enhance public engagement. These programs should be integrated into school curricula, community workshops, and public awareness campaigns to reach a broad audience. By equipping citizens with the knowledge and skills needed to engage effectively in governance, such initiatives can foster a more informed and active citizenry. Civic education also helps to build a culture of participation and accountability,

encouraging individuals to take an active role in shaping their communities and holding public officials accountable.⁴²

Finally, creating an environment that supports and encourages civic engagement requires commitment from both government and civil society. Governments should establish policies and practices that facilitate public participation, such as providing clear channels for input and ensuring transparency in decision-making processes. Civil society organizations play a crucial role in advocating for participatory practices, organizing community engagement activities, and providing platforms for citizen voices. Collaboration between government, civil society, and the private sector can lead to innovative solutions and more inclusive governance. By fostering a collaborative approach and valuing citizen input, governments can enhance the effectiveness of public policies and strengthen democratic institutions.⁴³

In summary, enhancing public participation and civic engagement involves expanding mechanisms for involvement, leveraging technology, promoting civic education, and fostering a supportive environment. These efforts can lead to more responsive and inclusive governance, improve policy outcomes, and strengthen the relationship between government and citizens.⁴⁴ By actively involving the public in decision-making processes, governments can ensure that policies reflect the diverse needs of society and contribute to a more vibrant and democratic political system.⁴⁵

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, reforming governance ethics in India is a multifaceted endeavor that requires comprehensive and targeted approaches to address the myriad challenges currently faced by the system. The need for reforms is underscored by issues such as pervasive corruption, bureaucratic inefficiencies, political interference, and the necessity for greater transparency and accountability. By focusing on key areas such as strengthening anti-corruption laws, enhancing the Right to Information (RTI) Act, improving legislative frameworks, and fostering public participation, India can lay the groundwork for a more ethical and effective governance structure. Strengthening anti-corruption laws is crucial for combating corruption and ensuring that public officials adhere to high ethical standards. This involves refining legal definitions, broadening the scope of anti-corruption measures, and

improving enforcement mechanisms to ensure that laws are implemented effectively. The enhancement of the RTI Act is similarly vital, as it empowers citizens to hold public authorities accountable and promotes transparency. Reforms should aim to improve response times, ensure accessibility, and strengthen enforcement to ensure that the RTI Act fulfills its role in fostering an open and accountable government.

Legislative reforms play a pivotal role in supporting the broader agenda of governance ethics. By addressing gaps in existing laws, expanding anti-corruption measures, and ensuring robust enforcement, legislative changes can significantly contribute to improving governance practices. Additionally, enhancing public participation and civic engagement is essential for creating a more inclusive and responsive governance framework. By expanding participatory mechanisms, leveraging technology, and promoting civic education, reforms can help bridge the gap between government and citizens, leading to more effective and representative governance. Ultimately, the path to reforming governance ethics in India is both challenging and promising. It requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders, including government officials, civil society organizations, the private sector, and the public. By embracing a holistic approach that addresses the root causes of governance issues and promotes transparency, accountability, and citizen engagement, India can build a more ethical and resilient governance system. These reforms will not only enhance the effectiveness of public administration but also contribute to greater trust in government institutions and a stronger democratic process. The journey towards reform is an ongoing process that demands vigilance, adaptability, and a commitment to the principles of integrity and fairness, ensuring that the governance system serves the best interests of all citizens and fosters a more just and equitable society.

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Empowering Women through Community Mobilization in Saving & Credit Group

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Abstract

Women empowerment, in the programs of community mobilization through the saving & credit group of cooperatives, is the study of changes on living status of women after their involvement. Community mobilization is a set of programs and activities on community development. Among the programs women empowerment is selected as a tool of community mobilization on women involved in Saving & Credit group. The study reveals the changes in community and women living, women empowerment, in the service area of Janakalyan Saving and Credit cooperative Malekhu Dhading. It has 9,691 members and among them 5023 are males and 4643 are females. To analyze the sociological facts on living status through the involvement in Saving & Credit group, women empowerment, the study has approached the qualitative descriptive method. Among the 4643 women simple 1% that is 47 women were selected randomly, sufficient for the qualitative study. Participatory observation, Key Informants Interview, and focus group discussion were used as the data collection tools. From the sociological perspective social, political, economic, and gender mainstreaming status of the women in community mobilization involved in Saving & Credit group found positive. The study finds out that Saving & Credit group plays an important role in women's empowerment by enhancing financial literacy, decision-making, and community participation. It also has positive impacts on household income, mobility, and children's education while fostering self-reliance and social recognition. However, challenges such as high-interest rates, financial literacy gaps, and gender inequalities persist, requiring further attention for sustainable empowerment.

Keywords

Community mobilization, Saving & Credit group, Women empowerment, Gender equality, Nepal.

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Empowering Women through Community Mobilization in Saving & Credit Group

1. Background

Women empowerment in community mobilization is one of the important elements of development in community. In the course of community mobilization, Saving & Credit group has played driving roles in women empowerment. Social, economic, political, and in gender mainstreaming Saving & Credit group in community mobilization has direct impact in women empowerment. As development is multidimensional the women empowerment is also multifaceted. Sociological empowerment means when a person is empowered with social, political, and economic aspects. Women are the victims of social, political, religious, and economic subordination and deprivation in Indian society (Mandal, 2013). The issue is not differed in Nepal. The situation of women empowerment in Nepal is further lower than India. Empowerment is giving power or authority to women in decision making. When women get opportunity on finance, they can make further decisions to make better life in community. The feminist scholar and activist Batliwala (1995) expresses her view of empowerment as *“the process of challenging existing power-relations in community, and of gaining greater control over the sources of power and strength, may be termed as empowerment by different scholars.”*

Kamala Bhasin (1998) also broadly defines the term women empowerment. She cites that, *“It means recognizing women’s contribution in the specified community, women’s knowledge on daily life; it means helping women fight against their own fears and feeling of inadequacy and inferiority. Further, it means women enhancing their self-respect and self-dignity in gender issues; it means women controlling their own bodies. She further means women becoming economically independent and self-reliant; it means women controlling resources like land and property; it means reducing women’s burden of work, especially within the home. It means creating and strengthening women’s groups and organizations; promoting qualities of nurturing, caring, gentleness not just in women but also in men.”* It means that economic empowerment

plays a vital role in overall empowerment. Saving & Credit group plays dynamic roles in community mobilization. Empowerment of women means equipping women to be economically independent, self-reliant, and having positive esteem which enable them to face any difficult situation and participate in development activities. The empowered women are able to participate in the process of decision making (Kapila *et al.*, 2016). From the Saving & Credit group women get financial empowerment. From financial empowerment they can increase their financial literacy, decision making, awareness, equality and equality. Selected all the 15 indicators are tested in the study qualitatively.

Indicators of Women Empowerment

Empowerment	Dimensions	Indicators
Women Empowerment	Social Empowerment	1. Mobility Decision 2. Decisions Regarding Children 3. Household Expenditure 4. Household Income
	Economic Empowerment	5. Access to Saving & Credit group 6. Saving Rates 7. Women led Enterprises 8. Employment Generation 9. Ownership of Assets
	Political Empowerment	10. Participation in Political 11. Parties 11. Participation in public protest 12. Participation in Development Projects
	Gender Mainstreaming	13. Freedom from domination in culture 14. Equality with Men/Husband 15. Awareness

Source: Al-shami *et al.*, 2021; Biswas & Kabir 2004.

According to the 15 indicators given by Al-shami *et al.*, (2021) and Biswas & Kabir (2004) the open-ended questionnaire was prepared and conducted the study.

2. Problem Statement

The effect of Saving & Credit group on women agency to make their decisions and control their resources (Al-Shami *et al.*, 2018). From the different entrepreneurial activities people can earn income. To earn something someone must invest either time or money. It is really a challenge to invest by the people poor community. It is

further other challenge to women in country like in Nepal. Saving & Credit group facilities provided by many Banks, microfinance companies, and cooperatives have given a significant platform for the women who want to enhance their living status in the specified community.

3. Objective

The main objective of this study is to evaluate the status of women empowerment in community mobilization within the involvement in Saving & Credit group.

4. Methods

It is a qualitative descriptive study of women empowerment in community mobilization through the involvement of Saving & Credit group.

Population and Sampling: The study is based on the service area of Janakalyan Saving and Credit Cooperative Malekhu Dhading. It has 9691 members and among them 5023 are males and 4643 are females. Among the 4643 women simple 1% that is 47 women were selected randomly, sufficient for the qualitative study.

Data collection: The data has been collected through observation, interview and focus group discussion. I visited the small business firms of the selected women, observed the production, staffs, and marketing scheme and their activities. I interviewed 47 selected women. I made focus group discussions (FGD) with same age groups (5 Groups) and education level groups (5 Groups). In total 10 FGD were conducted. In crux 47 observations, 47 interviews, and 10 FGD were conducted.

Data Analysis: It is a qualitative descriptive study. The results-based data collection has been analyzed through the given 15 indicators of women empowerment. 47 observations, 47 interviews, and 10 FGD were analyzed based on indicators.

5. Results and Discussion

Population Analysis

Among the 4643 women simple, 1% that is 47 women were selected randomly. Population Analysis is depicted in the table-1 on next page:

Table-1: Population Analysis

Age Group (5 FGD)	Numbers	Empowerment	Education Group (5 FGD)	Numbers	Empowerment
20-29	9	Normal	Literate	11	Normal
30-39	20	Increased	SEE/SLC	14	Increased
40-49	8	Increased	Ten Plus Two	15	Increased
50-59	7	Normal	Bachelors	5	Normal
60-69	3	Normal	Masters	2	Normal
Total	47	Increased	Total	47	Increased

Source: Field Work, November 2024.

On the basis of above population analysis table, observation, FGD, and Interview, the study has been conducted on 15 specified indicators of different dimensions of empowerment.

A. Social Empowerment

Who is how much empowered? It is almost impossible to measure. So, it is a qualitative study. From the observation of small business firm, their interview and from 5 age group discussions and 5 education level group discussion on the selected 4 indicators of social empowerment, the women are found that the level of social empowerment is increased and increasing gradually.

5.1 Mobility Decision

All the selected women were invited in the office of Janakalyan Saving and Credit cooperative Malekhu Dhading for focus group discussion. They were all present in the office. In the observation on marketing scheme they have many effective plans to visit market frequently. In an interview, Manamaya Shrestha (41) says, *"It is necessary to visit different places to know the market and its trends, without visiting how can we figure out the profitability?"* The concept of Saving & Credit group is directly related to the business. It has increased the entrepreneurial concepts of women as well. It indicates that their ability to make mobility decisions were increased and increasing gradually.

5-2 Decisions Regarding Children

From the observation, all the selected women have sent their children in private boarding schools. It is only possible with increased income. In the focused group discussion, they said it was almost difficult if the men do not assist them. It shows they have increased gender equality as well. They have leading roles in reproductive roles as well. In an interview, Rabina Kuinkel (34) said, *"Children are our future, if we make our present better our future will be best"*. The statement justifies hope and the sound empowerment on decision making. But most of them were worried and concerned about the trend of youth abroad migration.

5-3 Household Expenditure

From the observation clean school uniform, clean hygienic tiffin box and android mobile in their hand justify the increasing living household expenditures. From the focus group of discussion all of them are almost agreed on as the income comes expenditure is also increasing. Instead of sending public schools they are sending their children to expensive boarding schools. Kanchhi Ramtel (28) says, *"Yes expenditure is increasing but it is actually the investment for the future"*. From the conversation, household expenditure is increasing. People (women) are happy with these achievements, however they have many challenging issues.

5-4 Household Income

Household income is yearly gross income of a family from different types of sources like salary, wage, return in investment, farmhouse income and many more. It is determined as an economic indicator of poverty, production, and living status of a household. From the observation, cleanliness, decent cloths, good foods show that the household income of the Saving & Credit group group has been increasing. From the FGD, it was revealed, the women are perfectly motivated in their business and earning. They want to do more and invest more and seeking soft loans. Sunita Magratee (23), *"To earn some money for future security we are taking loan and doing this business, so as per the result level of our income is increasing little bit"*. Thus, it justifies the level of household income of the people are increasing substantially.

B. Economic Empowerment

Economic empowerment is enhancing access and opportunities to the financial resources of the deprived section of society in poverty

reduction, gender balance and equity. Economic empowerment reduces gender inequalities, enhances household well-being, and promotes economic growth. Policies supporting equal pay, financial inclusion, and women-led businesses are essential for sustainable development (Kabeer, 2019). From the observation, FGD and interviews almost all the indicators are showing positive reactions in the field.

5.5 Access to Saving & Credit Group

Saving & Credit group Scheme in community empowers women by providing financial resources to start or expand their businesses, to improve household income, and enhance social status. It is an important tool for poverty reduction, particularly in developing countries like Nepal, where women face barriers to traditional banking services. However, challenges such as high-interest rates and limited financial literacy can hinder its effectiveness (Yunus, 2017). But in Nepal cooperatives in such a crises period are doing proper well. From the observation and secondary information 4643 women have direct access to the Saving & Credit group . Among them selected 47 have taken credit loan and other assistance. From the FGD, women with lowest income group (literate) and second group SEE passed group are highly motivated. They visit cooperative's office regularly, Kanchhi Lama (53) says, *"service centers of cooperatives in village are providing services and we are easily approaching to them"*. Thus, services of Saving & Credit group is increasing and access to Saving & Credit group is increasing in remote villages as well.

5.6 Saving Rates

Different studies indicate that women tend to save more cautiously and prioritize household stability, education, and healthcare (Dupas & Robinson, 2013) from different jobs and business through Saving & Credit group. Generally excess over expenditure is a saving rate. From the observation they have some savings they have easy access to banks and Saving & Credit group . Some of them are regularly paying insurance premiums. From FGD, they accepted they have minimum amount in saving as well. However, some are just in the beginning stage. Ramila Lama (46) says, *"it took 4 years to pay the previous loans, I have just started some savings but expecting more loan to expand goat farm."* Thus, it seems the saving are increasing but in a way.

5.7 Women led Enterprises

Women led micro enterprises are operating in sectors such as agriculture, retail, handicrafts, and services. Women entrepreneurs face challenges such as limited access to credit, markets, and business training, yet they contribute significantly to local economies and poverty reduction (Brush *et al.*, 2019). But the case in Dhading, Nepal is different. Women are doing good business they have generated employment also, but the scale is very nominal. The micro business firms are not very professional. From the observation, I found 12 Cow farms, 10 Goat firms, 18 Chicken firms, 7 agricultural farms. From the FGD they are happy and pride to lead the enterprise. From an interview Gayatree Sapkota (63) says, *"It feels good to be an owner, but it is very challenging to like us not highly educated women"*. It means that they are leading the business but need more training and education.

5.8 Employment Generation

Similarly, from the observation most of them have appointed some regular staff. From FGD they are not happy from the performance, responsibility and accountability of the staffs. Shanti Karki (57) says, *"what to do, I am getting older, children are in abroad, I could not work as before, but staffs are not sincere"*. Anyway, the women and their small endeavor has substantially created employment in the community.

5.9 Ownership of Assets

Asset ownership enhances women's financial security, bargaining power, and ability to invest in businesses and household well-being. However, gender disparities in property rights, cultural norms, and legal barriers often limit women's access to assets, particularly in developing countries (Deere & Doss, 2006). From the observation women have owned assets. From the FDG, women are aware in the issue of fixed properties. Due to the government's women friendly taxation policy on land purchases, most of the family have purchased the land in the name of women in Nepal. Rammaya BK (25) says, *"Yes we have a mother-in-law, so we bought a piece of land in her name and making a small house, it feels so good."* From the census of 2021 only 23.8% of household is owned by female. But it is gradually increasing.

C. Political Empowerment

In 2023, Nepal continued its efforts toward political empowerment of women, maintaining a consistent representation of 33.1% in parliamentary seats—a figure that surpasses the South Asian

average of 18.2% and the lower-income countries' average of 21.8% (The Kathmandu Post, 2023). It seems the political women empowerment in Nepal is increasing.

5.10 Participation in Political Parties

Women's political participation in political parties is increasing. From the observation women have clear speech on the issues on their social and political issues. As they have fluency and clarity in their talks, they present their involvement in political leadership. From their FGD, almost all of them are members of different local political wings. Some of them are elected women member of ward development committee as well. From an interview, Manchala Kafle, (42) says, *"The leading policy among other policies is politics, but our leaders do not know or ignore the fact, so they are always in critical situation. Leaders must be able to lead all the policies"*. The statement is very powerful. It seems that Nepalese women can lead the future.

5.11 Participation in Public Protest

In developing countries, democratic polity is not completely stable. Due to the instability the governments have failed to provide justice and good governance. The failing state many times creates inequality, corruption, and many social disorders. So, time and again aware political people must take part in public protest. From observation they are, to some extent, related in political parties. So they have freedom to take participation. From FGD, they say, it is their (women's) time. Men did but failed. Muna Koirala (28) says, *"When I take part in like such political protests, I feel myself more confident and stronger, so I frequently visit"*. Thus, politically they are highly empowered.

5.12 Participation in Development Projects

As Nepal is a least developed country, Nepal needs to work and invest a huge amount in infrastructure development. Without women's participation development is not possible. However, the constitution has declared the 33 % of women's participation in every section of society is a must. From the observation most of them are related to development consumption groups. From FGD, women say, women in development and women and development is different. They prefer the women in development. Karishma Thapa (45) says, *"Men are physically strong, but women, children, and elderly are weak. So development is necessary to weaker people rather than strong"*

people". It means development will be more productive in the hands of women. It is a good notion of women empowerment.

D. Gender Mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming, equality in male and female, in Nepal involves integrating gender perspectives into all levels of policymaking, planning, and implementation to achieve gender equality and women empowerment. There was certain misconception regarding the culture of Nepal and western philosophy about the roles of women. But it is clear now. Mensuration issues, participation in Puja and functions are mainstreamed now. It is not an issue of religion but inner Dharma is first. If a women want to do she can do - but acceptance of society depends on how she performs. There is no discrimination at all except some cultural differences.

5.13 Freedom from Domination in Culture

No puja, no function, and no pilgrimage will be fulfilled if one does or go single if he or she is formally married. Widowed and unmarried have different systems that the west was not able to understand. Unmarried worship for good future good partner and good wishes but widowed worship for enlightenment. From the observation they have taken decent modern uniform (Pants Shirts and Kurtasuruwal) and Hindu cultural make ups like Bangles, Tika, Sindoor, and Pote. From the FGD, they are understanding old cultural values and recent scientific development. They love their culture and respect new development paradigms. In an interview Babita Thapa (25), says, *"Before leaders or people used to say religion is bad for society but we knew Dharma is not bad, but the people and their attitude are. So, we respect Dharma, Culture, and Modern Development as well"* the society is turned in postmodern era. The women in Dhading Nepal teaches the postmodernism, however still the leaders in Nepal are in modernity of 1950s.

5.14 Equality with Men/Husband

Men and women are different. Men have their own quality and women have their own. Modern west never understood it. The most important issue is not class conflict but love and respect, peace and harmony. The paradigm has been shifted from modernity to post modernism. From the observation, most of them have taken pants and Kurtasuruwal. Pant as well as Kurtasuruwal symbolically men's outfit. From the FGD, they claimed, it is the era of equality and

freedom based on socially accepted culture. Ramita Shrestah (29) said, *"Husband assists me on my business and outdoor activities, but he does not know household work. But I am happy with my husband"*. It seems that it is a good vive of equality or equity.

5.15 Awareness

85% of Nepalese people are Hindu. Hinduism is not only a religion but a civilization. It is based on empirical science since the time immemorial. It is the society of seekers not believers. People seek gods and goddess in everything. The Godly quality within anything is god and they do worship and puja. If the light is there is shadow as well. The dark side of light or god is demon. So, community seek light and darkness attentively in Nepal. Thus, it is the culture of seeking and getting God - godly qualities. The attentive seeking is awareness. Mother, father, teacher, tourist, tree, river, hill, cow, fish, pig, etc. everything is God and they respect. They also evaluate the negative consequences from demonic perspectives. So, they are highly aware. From the observation and FGD the women are clear in their responsibilities. They are highly conscious on people whom they talk and deal. Namrata Adhikari (51) says, *"I don't know, I am not so educated but try to see everything attentively"*. Thus, the level of awareness in women empowerment through Saving & Credit group is sufficiently satisfactory.

6. Conclusion

The study clearly shows that Saving & Credit group plays an important role in empowering women through community mobilization. It also shows that economic, social, and political empowerment is interconnected and financial access serving as a foundational element of it. Saving & Credit group enhances women's agency by fostering financial literacy, decision-making capabilities, and participation in household and community affairs. The Saving & Credit group positively influences women's mobility decisions, household income, expenditure patterns, and children's education. The findings further suggest that women involved in Saving & Credit group initiatives demonstrate increased self-reliance, confidence, and social recognition. Their active participation in business and financial management signifies a shift from traditional economic dependency to financial autonomy.

Similarly, Saving & Credit group facilitates gender mainstreaming by challenging cultural barriers and traditional power

dynamics in rural Nepal. Women's increased participation in political and developmental activities indicates that financial empowerment transcends economic benefits and extends to broader social transformations. However, challenges such as high-interest rates, financial literacy gaps, and persistent gender inequalities still need to be addressed for sustainable empowerment.

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Socio-demographic Factors affecting Skilled Birth Attendance Utilization in Koshi Province, Nepal

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Abstract

This study has maternal healthcare beyond borders and boundaries as a priority in global health, especially in low- and middle-income countries like Nepal, where maternal and neonatal mortality continues to remain alarming. The skilled birth attendant (SBA) is an important component that reduces mortality by serving to prevent or manage complications such as postpartum hemorrhage and obstructed labor. It also investigated the critical socio-demographic factors associated with SBA utilizations in Koshi Province, including maternal age, birth order, schooling, economic status, caste/ethnicity, place of residence, as well as religion. The secondary data were collected from NDHS covering the 2022 round under a two-stage stratified sampling design on 410 observations. The logistic regression has computed to assess the associations given as adjusted odds ratios (AORs) with 95 percent confidence intervals (CIs). The result was associated with different patterns of SBA utilization. There have been large geographic and economic inequalities reflected in the chances that women in rural areas and lower wealth quintiles have of accessing institutional care, as well as marginalized caste/ethnic groups and religious minorities being under barriers, but these have not reached statistical significance. The results are in accordance with worldwide initiatives aimed at reducing maternal and neonatal mortality in line with Sustainable Development Goal 3.

Keywords

Skilled birth attendance (SBA), Maternal healthcare, Socio-demographic factors, Koshi province, Institutional delivery, Nepal.

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1. Introduction

Maternal health services are part and section of global health, which greatly impacts both maternal and neonatal mortality as well as morbidity rates. The delivery services by trained health personnel such as doctors, nurses, and midwives are defined by skilled birth attendance (SBA) and are recognized as a cornerstone maternal health intervention (WHO, 2020). Despite globalization aiming for the inclusion of SBAs, various disparities have continued to arise across the world, most notably in low- and middle-income countries like Nepal. In fact, remains that these disparities appear largely rooted in various socio-demographic characteristics that restrict equal access to skilled care during childbirth. Similarly, Nepal has experienced an impressive decline in maternal mortality, with the maternal mortality ratio (MMR) declining from 901 per 100,000 live births in 1990 to 186 in 2017 (UNICEF, 2021). National improvement, however, is not reflected in provinces such the Koshi Province, which face socio-economic, geographic and cultural barriers that limit access to skilled birth attendants. The province has a variegated population and represents a balance of urban and rural settings, making it a relevant site for the understanding of factors influencing SBA utilization. However, national advancement does not translate at provincial levels like the Koshi province, which faces socio-economic and demographic barriers and delays access to skilled birth attendants. It has a heterogeneous population that consists of both urban and rural settings, making it a relevant site to understand the factors that influence SBA utilization.

It is important to understand the socio-demographic determinants of SBA usage in Koshi Province to deal with issues of maternal health inequity. The study here examines how maternal age, education, economic status, geographical location, caste/ethnicity, and cultural practices determine the possibility of women obtaining skilled assistance during childbirth. This study examines the differential relationship between socio-demographic factors,

such as maternal age, education, and economic status, and SBA utilization in Koshi Province. Skilled birth attendance is an effective intervention to improve maternal and neonatal health results. Globally, SBA has been credited with decreased maternal deaths by treating complications such as postpartum hemorrhage, sepsis, and obstructed labor (Katz *et al.*, 2019). In LMICs, increasing SBA coverage is critical for achieving Sustainable Development Goal 3 (SDG 3), which foresees decreasing the global MMR to less than 70 per 100,000 live births by 2030 (United Nations, 2020). Young adolescent mothers tend to have these limitations in accessing such service due to lack of independence and often very restricted financial resources as well as the stigma attached (Banke-Thomas *et al.*, 2020). In contrast, women with whom their birth order is higher tend to prefer home deliveries because of a perception that such births carry less risk after previously successful deliveries (Bohren *et al.*, 2020). South Asia study indicates that first time mothers are more likely to have SBA due to anxiety around childbirth (Thapa *et al.*, 2021). However, one of the most important factors that is associated with using SBA is higher education, which increases women's knowledge about risks during pregnancy and childbirth, and allows them to make better decisions (Singh *et al.*, 2020). Women with higher levels of education are more likely to look for out institutional delivery services and interrelate with the health care system. Economic status also strongly affects access; wealthier women have more access to transport and health facilities, and financial constraints often force poorer women to work with unskilled traditional birth attendants (Afulani *et al.*, 2019).

The multi-ethnic and caste-based social structure of Nepal has a huge bearing in determining access to health care. In addition, communities experiencing systemic discrimination are impoverished and face economic barriers that can prevent them from being able to receive SBA (Karki *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, cultural norms and customs also discourage institutional births, especially in rural areas where community beliefs tend to value deliveries at home (Shrestha *et al.*, 2021).

Urban areas always have higher SBA coverage because of the good healthcare infrastructure and shorter distances to facilities and healthcare providers. Rural areas do not have these resources, and thus barriers are created depending on long travel distances, poor road conditions, and limited availability of skilled professionals

(Khatri *et al.*, 2021). The targeted investment in rural healthcare infrastructure is needed to bridge such disparities.

Policy measures like Nepal's Safe Delivery Incentive Program (SDIP) or the Maternal incentive scheme have been found beneficial for increasing SBA utilization by lifting financial burdens (Regmi *et al.*, 2021). These interventions also need strategies that take care of non-financial impediments such as cultural isolation. Many studies have shown that community-based health initiatives with local leadership and SBA normalization would work in such contexts (Pandey *et al.*, 2020). This study, therefore, considers into how such factors relate and influence maternal health seeking behavior and draw implications for policymakers as well as health providers in an unexplored area, Koshi Province, where other studies have focused on the determinates of SBA utilization in Nepal.

Its unique socio-cultural composition, with both ethnic diversity and varying levels of economic development, provides an interesting context with which to explore the factors that determine the use of a skilled birth attendant. This study focuses on the combination of such socio-demographic factors in order to provide strategies that can improve maternal health results in the province.

The understanding socio-demographic determinants influencing SBA use is critical in the reduction of maternal and neonatal mortality in Nepal. The study is directed at Koshi Province, which contributes to the global dialogue on maternal health disparities across LMICs. This study thus resonates with efforts globally to achieve SDG 3 and demonstrates the importance of equity in maternal healthcare. Ultimately, it is this attendance that directly improves maternal and neonatal health results, not only future efforts, but is associated with complex socio-demographic and systemic factors with regard to its utilization in Koshi Province. This study questions such determinants to come up with practical recommendations aimed at improving maternal and child health equity. This study means to cover the way for improved healthcare access and reduction in maternal and neonatal mortality in Nepal by identifying barriers and proposing targeted interferences at the appropriate levels.

Nepal to really lower the maternal and neonatal mortality, it is important to understand the socio-demographic factors that determine SBA utilization. This study Koshi Province while adding to the wider argument on maternal health disparities within LMICs.

The developing targeted involvements, for instance, through community engagement programs, investment in health care infrastructure, and financial facilitation mechanisms with an objective of increasing SBA coverage. This study fits within the global aspiration to realizing SDG 3 and accentuates the equity in access to health care services for mothers. Skilled birth attendance is such a critical intervention for maternal and neonatal health yet the reality of its use in the Koshi Province is determined by a number of socio-demographic and systemic factors.

2. Data and Methods

This study has used of secondary data from the Nepal Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) in 2022. This is a national survey which was performed by the Ministry of Health and Population (MoHP). It ensured demographic and geographical representation through a stratified two-stage sampling design. This study area has Koshi Province which use of skilled birth attendance (SBA) was studied, as it relates to whether the delivery was delivered institutionally or non-institutionally. This was carried out against some socio-demographic factors such as maternal age, order of birth, education, religion, caste/ethnicity, place of residence, and wealth quintile. The logistic regression was done to see the association calculated as adjusted odds ratios (AORs) with 95 percent confidence intervals (CIs) after taking account of the survey's complex design through stratification and weighting. This study has done by incorporating 72 primary sampling units (PSUs) and a weighted population size of 446.31, hence fairly strong insights into maternal healthcare-utilization in Koshi Province.

3. Results

The socio-demographic factors that are affecting skill birth attendance (SBA) where determinants are very important in maternal care-seeking behavior particularly in developing-resource-poor countries like Koshi Province, Nepal. In this regard, age, birth order, level of education, religion, and caste/ethnicity, place of residence, and wealth quintile examined concerning the use of SBA. Maternal age is a significant factor for skilled birth attendance (SBA) use among mothers. The younger mothers are mostly without sufficient collateral information for health accessibility, while older women may prefer delivering at home following a successful delivery before. First births have more use of

SBA because all the usual births are not consumed because of the commonness, perception, and inadequacy of resources. The role of education is important because it makes women understand the importance of SBA and helps them to have better decision-making. Religion, in fact, prescribes healthcare: some do not support modern practices while others advocate institutional care. Interventions hence need a tailored and culturally sensitive.

Caste and ethnicity have a determining effect on SBA use in Nepal. Systematically constructed hurdles continue as barriers that deny the marginalized access to skilled care, while the dominant groups are in a better position to benefit from the resources and opportunities offered by the system. Generally, urban residents show a higher usage of SBA services vis a vis the rural masses, whose access is delayed by distance, poor infrastructure, and lack of transport.

The other major determinant is economic status represented by wealth quintiles. Wealth status should enable many women to give birth with the help of trained providers, while those without access to wealth would more often use traditional attendants because they simply cannot afford it. To ensure equity in maternal health in Nepal, all these disparities—socio-economic, geographical, and cultural—have to be addressed and integrated into health systems so that they can possibly improve SBA utilization.

Table-1: Distribution of Demographic and Socio-economic Variables

Variable	Non Institutional		Institutional		Total	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Age						
<20	8	7.8	36	8.9	44	8.7
20-24	21	21.2	144	35.6	165	32.7
25-29	35	34.9	131	32.3	165	32.8
30-49	36	36.2	94	23.3	130	25.8
Birth order						
First	21	21.0	197	48.7	218	43.2
Second	41	41.3	152	37.5	193	38.3
Third or higher	37	37.7	56	13.8	93	18.5
Level of education						
No Education	25	25.1	38	9.5	63	12.6
Basic Education	74	74.0	309	76.5	383	76.0

Higher Education	1	1.0	57	14.1	58	11.5
Religion						
Hindu	64	64.4	287	71.0	351	69.7
Other religion	35	35.6	115	28.5	151	29.9
Caste/Ethnicity						
Dalit	12	12.0	45	11.1	57	11.3
Janjati	5	4.6	33	8.2	38	7.5
Other Terai	68	67.9	189	46.7	256	50.9
Brahmin/Chhetri	6	5.8	38	9.4	44	8.7
Place of Residence						
Urban	51	51.3	274	67.8	325	64.5
Rural	48	48.7	130	32.2	179	35.5
Wealth Quintile						
Poorest	59	59.2	70	17.3	129	25.6
Poorer	21	21.1	90	22.3	111	22.1
Middle	10	10.4	92	22.9	103	20.4
Richer	9	9.3	97	24.1	107	21.2
Richest	0	0.0	54	13.4	54	10.8
Total	99	100.0	404	100.0	504	100.0

Source: Nepal Demographic and Health Survey, 2022

That reflects the distribution of demographic and socio-economic variables in relation to the access to institutional and non-institutional birth services, indicating differences in maternal healthcare access results. Table shows that facility-based services were used most by women aged 20-24 years (35.6%) and 25-29 years (32.3%), jointly accounting for more than two-thirds of institutional deliveries (68%). Adolescents (<20 years) have the smallest share in both institution (8.9%) and total deliveries (8.7%), probably implying some forms of constraint like less autonomy and/or knowledge. Women aged 30-49 years are more likely to have their babies delivered outside the health facility (36.2%), partly due to the fact that most of them have previously delivered children and are deemed to have fewer perceived risks.

Institutional births account for 48.7 percent of all first births. This is because being a first-time mother is quite anxiety-inducing, and childbirth itself is an experience much different from all prior life experiences. In contrast, only 37.7 percent of modern non-

institutional deliveries fall into a higher category of order third-born or higher. This result suggests a perceived decreasing need for the institution as the number of orders increases. Education emerges as a significant determinant of institutional deliveries. Uneducated ladies formed 25.1 percent of the non-institutional deliveries and only 9.5 percent formed the institutional deliveries, clearly showing the impact of education in the decision-making process in the healthcare. The majority of women with primary education belongs to both the groups but shows a significant inclination towards institutional deliveries (76.5%). Higher education has a direct correlation with institutional deliveries (14.1%), highlighting the need for education as a way of increasing women utilization of maternal health services.

Hindu women occupy the highest status, as 71 percent of deliveries take place in an institution compared with 64.4 percent in non-institutional ones, representing the religious affiliation in the study. However, percentages from other religions show comparatively higher proportions of non-institutional deliveries (35.6%), which indicates that there might be some cultural or system-related barriers in accessing institutional care. Much significance bears upon caste and ethnicity greatly influences skilled birth attendance. The marginalized groups such as Dalits and Janjatis make up a greater percentage of non-institutional deliveries (12.0% & 4.6%) as compared to those who attain institutional deliveries (11.1% & 8.2%). Women from the dominant castes such as Brahmin, Chhetri have a higher use of institutions (9.4%) because the women from these castes are more accessible to resources and healthcare services. Place of residence rather determines service consumption. Urban women attain institutional deliveries more (67.8%) because facilities and accessibility of the services are better in urban areas. The rural women, on the other hand, have a higher rate of non-institutional deliveries (48.7%) because it represents geographical and infrastructural barriers of access to skilled birth services in rural areas.

Economic inequalities with the wealthiest quintile exclusively using institutional care (13.4%). Wealth correlates positively with the use of institutional delivery, with affordability reported as the strongest barrier for the poorest segments of the population. The differences in skilled attendance at birth based on demographic and socioeconomic characteristics which these differences with appropriate remedies such as improved rural health infrastructure,

achieved education, and lowered financial barriers would be critical to improving maternal health results. This is importance as evidence-generative information for policymakers aiming for equitable access to maternal services.

The logistic-regression analysis: The logistic regression model has applied to assess the association between a set of independent variables and the odds of institutional delivery. This method is well suited for binary dependent variables, such as institutional versus non-institutional delivery, because it allows for adjusting the effects of a complex survey design that includes stratification, clustering, and weighting. From the results, it can be concluded that the predictors are jointly significant in accounting for institutional deliveries. Survey-adjusted logistic regression would provide robust and generalizable results by taking the survey design's variation into account. Furthermore, this analysis provides a sound basis for following determinants of skilled birth attendance and developing evidence-based study. Skilled birth attendance (SBA) is central to minimizing maternal and neonatal mortality. The coverage of SBAs is lower in many places, despite the push from global system. The socio-demographic predictors of SBA utilization are analyzed through survey-adjusted logistic regression approaches to answer this analysis robustly while considering its complex sample design.

The 410 observations have instrumented into two strata comprising 72 primary sampling units (PSUs) for the survey logistic regression analysis. The dependent result variable was defined in terms of the SBA utilization (institutional vs. non-institutional delivery). Independent variables were composed of age, birth order, caste/ethnicity, education, residence, and wealth quintile. The division of adjusted odds ratios (ORs), standard errors, and confidence intervals (CIs) was done, and statistical significance as one, five and percent.

Table-2: Factors Association of Demographic and Socio-economic Variables

Variable	Odds Ratio	Std. Err.	T	P> t	95% Conf. Interval
Age					
20-24	1.759587	1.052327	0.94	0.348	0.5338182-5.800003
25-29	0.8374238	0.4548922	-0.33	0.745	0.2834239-2.47431
30-49	1.028494	0.6901314	0.04	0.967	0.2697678-3.921154

Birth Order					
Second	0.3284961	0.1328827	-2.75	0.008	0.1466045-0.7360598***
Third or higher	0.155583	0.0863443	-3.35	0.001	0.0514351-0.4706135***
Religion					
Other religion	1.423995	0.50971	0.99	0.327	0.6973766-2.9077
Caste/Ethnicity					
Muslim	0.8214025	0.7738959	-0.21	0.835	0.1254524-5.378152
Janjati	0.3761145	0.2323553	-1.58	0.118	0.1097027-1.289504
Other Terai	0.5636897	0.3764104	-0.86	0.394	0.1488137-2.135193
Brahmin/Chhetri	1.150418	0.6682384	0.24	0.81	0.3611817-3.664257
Educational attainment					
Basic Education	1.22257	0.4946618	0.5	0.621	0.545523-2.739898
Higher Education	6.538602	8.053968	1.52	0.132	0.560493-76.27805
Residence					
Rural	0.6230858	0.1693422	-1.74	0.086	0.3623592-1.071412*
Wealth quintile					
Poorer	3.407533	1.293223	3.23	0.002	1.598494-7.263888***
Middle	7.574347	4.198362	3.65	0	2.507476-22.87987***
Richer	6.801711	3.610271	3.61	0.001	2.359736-19.60528***
_cons	3.407533	1.293223	3.23	0.002	1.598494-7.263888**

*** p<.01, ** p<.05, * p<.1

Age has not significantly predicted the utilization of SBA. Just like Marginal women aged 20-24 (OR = 1.76, 95% CI = 0.53-5.80) and 30-49 (OR = 1.03, 95% CI = 0.27-3.92), there are no major differences compared to the reference category (<20 years). SBA use, on the contrary, is inversely associated with higher birth order. Odds ratio values are lower for women with the second birth (OR = 0.33, p = 0.008), and women with three or more births had very low odds (OR = 0.16, p = 0.001), indicating SBA declining with growing parity.

Neither religion nor caste/ethnicity had any significant impacts. For example, Janjati women (OR=0.38, p=0.118) and women of other Terai ethnicities (OR=0.56, p=0.394) were less likely to access SBA, but these results were non-significant. Education showed a positive

association which was limited to statistical significance. Higher odds of SBA were borne by more educated women (OR=6.54, 95% CI=0.56-76.28, $p=0.132$), thus showing the possible weighting of education in maternal health care decisions.

Rural residence associated with negative direction in the use of SBA (OR=0.62, $p=0.086$)- reflected in its barriers concerning health care delivery in the rural areas. Thus, economic status would be a strong predictor for the utilization of SBA. Economically disadvantaged women had 3.41 odds ($p=0.002$) above the odds for middle and richer quintiles; OR=7.57, $p<0.001$; OR=6.80, $p<0.001$), reflecting how wealth becomes a significant determinant towards institutional delivery.

Such analysis shows the vast social-economic disparity in SBA utilization. Wealthier and urban women very likely use institutional delivery, marking the difference affordability makes in getting to health benefits. In contrast, higher birth order was noted to be associated with reduced SBA utilization-an indicative cultural perception that subsequent deliveries are an accepted routine and require less medical involvement. Education did not have a statistically significant impact but had a positive association, hence, indicating its importance as a long-term determinant. All that the study states, needs specific policy strategies to reduce utilization barriers such as economy and geography in using SBA. Initiatives such as expanded access to healthcare in rural areas through subsidized delivery costs and maternal education promotion will significantly improve maternal health. Future study should be conducted into the qualitative aspects of these factors so that they complement quantitative profiles. The policymakers will need to emphasize development of finance incentives subsidies in reducing economic barriers towards using SBA. This study moves beyond the mere empirical evidence to speak to addressing maternal health inequities in global efforts towards achieving equitable access to SBA, which would thereby translate into reduced maternal and neonatal mortality rates.

4. Discussion

This study analyzed the determinants of skilled birth attendance (SBA) in a resource-limited setup while gaining an understanding into the socio-demographic and economic factors influencing the ranges made by mothers regarding the health services. It has noted

critical disparities in SBA use that call for needed involvements for harmonizing mother-neonate health results.

Age was neither a prime correlate nor significant determinant of SBA's utilization and women between the ages of 20-24 and 30-49 did not differ significantly from adolescents (<20 years). Such contrast was in correlation to earlier studies, which reported that younger mothers often had limited knowledge or autonomy regarding institutional delivery (Banke-Thomas *et al.*, 2017). The older women, who tend to be more informed of the risks involved in childbirth, were indicated to access SBA services more than younger women (Gebrehiwot *et al.*, 2020).

The absence of a significant association in this study can be attributed to the fairly similar healthcare access issue experienced by all age groups in the study population. Further studies should consider the relevant analytical designs to measure age-specific interferences such as adolescent maternal health education in alleviating these barriers. Birth order showed a strong reverse dependency on SBA utilization. Second-born women were associated with 67 percent lower odds of using SBA. Those who delivered three or more offspring had an 84 percent reduction in the odds of using SBA compared to first-time mothers. This correlates with conclusions indicating that elder parity mothers consider further deliveries to be routine and less risky hence would be less likely to seek institutional care (Dhakal *et al.*, 2011). Addressing this behavior would require educating higher-parity mothers about the benefits of SBA regardless of parity.

Evidence has insufficient in either religious or caste/ethnic identity significantly affecting use of refined behavioral assessments (SBAs), which result runs counter to the large number of differences documented in other studies. For example, caste-based discrimination is likely to limit access to healthcare among marginalized groups in Nepal (Bhandari *et al.*, 2020). The lack of statistical significance may be attributed to sample size; however, it underscores a need to further study the confluence of social identity and access to health care.

Actually, education and association towards the SBA practice were positive, but it was not statistically significant. Women with more than six month have odds of more than six times utilizing SBA than women without formal education. People now consider education as one of the most important determinants for maternal

healthcare empowering women to make informed decisions, and it helps an individual to communicate better with health providers (Olonokpono & Odimegwu, 2014). The limited statistical significance in this study could be recognized to a small proportion of highly educated women in the sample. Long-term maternal health impacts are reported through universal education policies which especially favors girls.

The rural residence is negatively related to SBA institution utilization whereby rural women are 38 percent less likely to have institutional delivery than their urban equals. This affirms previous studies that pointed out the geographical inequalities in access to healthcare in Nepal, especially in its rural areas with poor infrastructure and barriers in the transport network (Bohren *et al.*, 2020). Building rural maternity centers and better transport networks will also create an opportunity to alleviate these gaps. Mobile health interventions and telemedicine could complement this program in reducing the urban-rural divide in maternal healthcare.

The economic status emerged as the most dominant variable that predicted making use of SBA. Some poor women were less likely to utilize SBA services than the richer and middle quintiles. The affluent women are better positioned to hold some institutional delivery-related direct and indirect costs-payments to the facility, transportation, and opportunity costs (Choudhury & Ahmed, 2011). Hence, it calls for financial involvements such as subsidized maternal health services and conditional cash transfers to make SBA more accessible to disadvantaged economic groups. Further enhancing provisions would be incorporating community-based health insurance schemes that could also eliminate financial barriers and hence promote equitable access to maternal healthcare. The results of this study have serious implications for Nepalese maternal health policies and those of similar settings.

Awareness programs promoting the importance of SBA at birth for all births or parity can lessen the cultural perceptions around certain births less valued within an institution. Investment in rural health facilities and transport is critical to reducing geographical disparities. Programs such as maternity waiting homes that serve as temporary homes close to health facilities are proven to improve access of rural women to maternal health services (Van Lonkhuijzen *et al.*, 2012).

A significant merit in this study is the formulary of survey-adjusted logistic regression, which represents the complexity of sampling designs. Hence, its results hold generalizability. However, certain constraints would have to be taken into account. The lack of statistical significance for certain variables, such as education or caste/ethnicity, might be sample-size dependent rather than indicative of a lack of meaningful association. Furthermore, the nature of the data is cross-sectional, and this fails to allow for any causal inferences. Further studies should include longitudinal designs to impact the change in SBA use over meaningful time.

This study provides a hard and sound body of evidence on socio-economic inequalities influencing the utilization of skilled birth attendants in Nepal, pointing out the importance of economic status, residence in rural areas, and order of birth. This disparity is in need of specific interferences, such as financial incentives, development of rural health infrastructure, and education programs. It would take policymakers actions about the equitable access to maternal health care to decrease maternal and neonatal mortality and achieve targets set by the global health such as Sustainable Development Goal 3. Further study, especially qualitative, is required to fill in the gaps with these quantitative results to develop a comprehensive understanding of the barriers that inhibit SBA application.

5. Conclusion

The impact of demographic and socio-economic factors on maternal health-seeking behavior. The results show that the availability of institutional delivery has not been evenly generalized, especially on the grouping of women measured by order of birth, level of education, economic status, as well as by location. Age is not a significant variable on SBA utilization. However, there is a 76.3 percent representation of the younger women aged 20-24 in the institution used deliveries. Education showed a positive but statistically insignificant association with the use of SBA where women with higher education showed the greatest likelihood of institutional delivery. This study indeed attests that educational empowerment plays a crucial role in maternal health decision-making in women. The urban-rural divide also establishes rigidity for women with respect to health care. Institutional delivery had become urban women, who had greater health care infrastructure and accessibility compared with rural women who are constrained

by barriers involving limited facilities for transportation. Expansion of health care into these rural areas and the placing of units that move seem to fill this gap.

Socioeconomic status became the most important predictor of SBA utilization, with wealthier quintiles showing that women had odds raised by institutional delivery much further. This study would provide evidence-informed perspectives in terms of the factors impacting the utilization of skilled birth attendance. Policymakers would stake their priorities on addressing the economic and geographic barriers, promoting educational attainment, and fixing false cultural beliefs surrounding childbirth in the cause of maternal healthcare access equity.

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Picturesque Journey in Mimicry: Nature Culture Resemblance in Dorothy Wordsworth's Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland

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Abstract

Nature-culture mimicries are exotic in Dorothy's travelogue where she zooms the images from her tour to Scotland. This paper discusses on the issues of Scottish landscapes and Dorothy's excitement while travelling there with her brother Wordsworth and Coleridge. Radical and sensitive potentialities of Dorothy's travel narratives empower the women travelers that is zoomed in Dorothy's Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland. Though facing some challenges in the journeys to mountains, jungles and sea-shores; the travelers are busy to study the nature and take some photographs in the beautiful environment that is discussed in this paper. Objective of this paper is to excavate on nature-culture relationships and travelers' exoticism, and so this paper is prepared on the basis of travel narratives. This paper follows a qualitative research method and so it is prepared on the basis of the primary and secondary resources for which texts and relevant references are studied comparatively. Methodological implications of Brain G. Wolff, John Hemming, Henry Bates and Alexander Von. Humboldt's theories help to excavate environmental beauties and the risk factors shown in Dorothy's narratives in a comparative framework. Picturesque collection helps to critique Dorothy's narratives based on ecological environment and challenges that might come in its future. Finding of this paper is that the tour literature is a part of eye observation whereas the writer travels himself/herself and writes about his /her own observations and experiences that refreshes mind and the body both.

Keywords

Picturesque tourism, Women travelers, Exoticism, Mimicry, Scottish ethnography.

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**Picturesque Journey in Mimicry: Nature
Culture Resemblance in Dorothy
Wordsworth's *Recollections of a Tour
Made in Scotland***

1. Introduction, Text and the Context

Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland is a travelogue written on the basis of factual mimicries of Dorothy Wordsworth. The travel begins from August 14th Sunday 1803 and that continues for six weeks. It begins from Keswick-Grismod-Hesket that follows the Caldbeck Falls. Rose Castle and Headhills are the other beautiful places that they visited in the mimicry. John Campbell Shairp praises their journey and writes, "upholding presence of one on whom the soul's dark foundations rest" ("Preface" xxx). According to Shairp, Dorothy's imagination on the nature-culture relationship is toned to poetic expressions of the true soul that understands the naturalistic mood and spiritual language. Her eye witness is much authenticated with the supportive statements of her brother William Wordsworth and S.T. Coleridge as they recite the poems there. She speaks about nature-culture beauties of the ecological environment where she compares the beauty of Kilchurn Castle with an Alps and the jungle that they visited on the way to Scotland. Shairp perceives their Scottish travel experiences as a joyous part of life and writes, "delightful country looking out on the distance sea" ("Preface" xii). It was all covered with the natural things what Shairp likes a lot. He is also lost in this imaginative framework of the real land and writes again, "The hills that cradle these valleys are either covered with fern and bilberries, or oak woods" (xiii). Shairp critiques Dorothy's travelogue what she and her friends observe in Scotland and entertain the things there. According to him, the travelers resemble nature-culture dichotomies with the mimicries which Dorothy accompanies the things in her tour to Scotland.

Dorothy's first week travel is much exciting. It starts on the hot day of August but it is amusing because of the chilling environment of the hills, covered with snowfall in the high altitude. People riding horses and singing songs on the way nearby the public houses is exciting for the travelers. Walking on the green grasses; observing

beautiful flowers by the side of streams gives shining images to their lives whereas imagining about the chill winter white land covered with snow brings a complexity. Dorothy writes, "The air was very cold, and one could not help thinking what it must be in winter, when those hills, now 'red brown', should have their three months' covering of snow" ("First Week", 11). The statement clarifies that, it is not easy to travel in the high geographical altitudes because of the ecological and environmental conditions; however, ".....it is exciting to them who accept the challenges" (Bates 36). Bates's statement about the challenges that the travelers have to face re-glorify Dorothy's narratives. Dorothy re-states their difficult journey within that beautiful sceneries in these lines:

The trees told of the coldness of the climate; they were more brown than green-far browner than the ripe grass of the little hay-garths. Here, as at Wanlockhead, were haycocks, hay-stacks, potato-beds, and kail-garths in every possible variety of shape, but, I suppose from the irregularity of the ground, it looked far less artificial-indeed, I should think that a painter might make several beautiful pictures in this village. It straggles down both sides of a mountain glen. As I have said, there is a large mansion. There is also a stone building that looks like a school, and the houses are single, or in clusters, or rows as it may chance. (*Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland*, "First Week", 12)

Dorothy talks about climate change, air condition and whispering sound of the trees. She historicizes some changing aspects of the natural things and their artistic values as she mentions that the "painters might make lots of pictures there in the village" (14). The roads are designed beautifully and decorated by the local inhabitants. Well architecture buildings painted in different colors by the side of the natural beauties of the 'Sal bushes' and 'nut trees' make the travelling more exciting whereas Coleridge composes and recites the poems despite of his difficult health condition. Travelers enjoy horse riding on the way to Clyde river banks that cross the Lanerk town from the right angle. Trees, herbs, grasses and the potato plants are amazing there on the side of the trekking roots. They seem sometimes greener and sometimes colorful like the things of women's collections elsewhere even in the bareness of the neighboring hills. It is a difficult travel but a memorable experience to the travelers who had been climbing upwards the hills, mountains and the villages covered by the snowfall where the people have to suffer of the chill cold.

Second week's travel begins on Sunday, 21st August, that is much exciting as it passes by the side of a waterfall, in front of the lady-like house. The house looks really beautiful with a moderate size garden in a very nice-looking place. Tower like mountain in front of the majestic waterfall is a desirous artwork in the pleasing ground of Scotland. In addition, the cultural references included in the travel account make it more historical as she writes, "The lanes were full of people going to church; many of the middle-aged women wore long scarlet cardinals, and were without hats: they brought to my mind the women of Goslar as they used to go to church in their silver or gold caps, with their long cloaks, black or colored" ("Second Week", 23). Pretty stone house and the lanes by its side from where the people were going towards the church are memorable. On the way to churchyard travelers could see the huts, scattered trees and the green fields with hedgerows. The lakes on the laps of the hills in Ben Lomond are the sources of the fresh water. Dorothy and her co-travelers have delightful feelings while crossing the mountains, lakes, Himalayas and observing the mesmerizing beauties of the nature. They enjoy taking snapshots in front of the waterfall, ferry house, castle, caves and the Clyde in Loch Lomond.

Third week's travel begins on August 28. It is pouring with a heavy rain. They cross the Glengyle to Glenfalloch mountain above the Loch Lomond. Milking cows by a Highland Girl on the Garrison house of the Scottish farmland makes them spellbound. The girl narrates the stories of the Church of England and the lonely parts of Scotland. They cross the open fields, mountains and high hills under rocks where William composes a poem:

Sweet Highland girl, a very shower
Of beauty is thy earthly dower!
Twice seven consenting years have shed
Their utmost bounty on the head:
And these grey rocks; this household lawn;
This fall of water, that doth make... ("Third Week", 71).

They cross the beautiful scenes by the side of the silent lake with that beautiful girl in a romantic mood. Fishermen's nests hung in the foaming streams seem mysterious to the travelers. Duke of the castle allows them to observe the thing that makes their travel researchable. Observing on the shape of the castle and cultural connections of the fashionable things decorated there make their travel really meaningful. Finally, they return back to the place where Coleridge

was passing out his painful days because of his illness. They talk a lot, share their experiences, take their dinner and have a good sleep.

Fourth week's travel is rather fresh and exciting after their accompany with Coleridge. They eat boiled eggs in the breakfast with other Egyptian foot-travelers that refresh and provide an energy to them from the tiredness. They pass the ways out from King's house and cross the Black Mount hill. They start discussing about their artworks and the cultural differences on the way to Tyndrum. The journey continues up to Grasmere and Wytheburn from where they are able to view Loch Tay and Dochart falls. After few minutes they cross the Dochart and go towards the road at Duke of Athol. Wordsworth and Coleridge, both, compose the poems about geography, natural beauties, traditional arts, culture and the wars, and recite them. In the meantime, Dorothy writes and recites a poem:

In this still place remote from men
Sleeps Ossian, in the Northern Glen,
In this still place where murmurs on
But one meek streamlet, only one.
He sung of battles and the breath
Of stormy war, and violent death,
And should, methinks, when all was pass'd,
Have rightfully been laid at last
Where rocks were rudely heap'd, and rent
As by a spirit turbulent;
Where sights were rough, and sounds were wild,
And everything unreconciled,
In some complaining, dim retreat
Where fear and melancholy meet;
But this is calm; there cannot be
A more entire tranquility. ("Fourth Week", 134-35)

The above noted lines re-historicize stillness of the natural things, artworks, cultural practices, wars and their reflections. This poetic expression celebrates Scottish beauties on the one hand and destructive wars on the other hand. The lines valorize the forests, streams, rivers and their calmness on the one hand and human stupidities who go on wars on the other hand. She writes, also, about a dirty public house named as a hill's cottage where they took their breakfast and started their Fifth week travel.

Fifth week's travel begins on September 11 immediately after the breakfast. They walk towards ferryman's house to lodge the things there. A boy helped them to get a horse and a car to get back to the Callander from Loch Achray where they can see a delightful scene of the Loch Ketterine and Loch Vennachar. They make the travel fun for whole day in Doune village, Teith river, Loch Voil with the fellow travelers, highland girls and the fun makers. Dorothy writes, "The interesting feelings we had connected with the Highland Sabbath and Highland worship returned here with double force" ("Fifth Week", 143). They enjoy the natural beauties in the lake districts, dales, mountains, river banks and the valleys. The Glenfalloch village is interestingly mentioned as a most beautiful place among the places of their visit. The moments cannot be forgotten easily when they crossed the green fields and the beautiful rivers. Finally, they reach to the inn, viewed an Architectural beauty of Chapel of Roslin and passed their night in an old-fashioned public-house.

The final tour week is the sixth week that begins on 18th September 1803. They start their journey along the side of Neidpath Castle, upon the green hill, after breakfast. They enjoy the sight scenes of the grass land where the farmers graze their sheep, Dorothy composes a poem:

A brotherhood of venerable trees,
Leaving an ancient Dome and Towers like these
Beggar'd and outraged! Many hearts deplored
The fate of those old trees; and oft with pain
The Traveller at this day will stop and gaze
On wrongs which Nature scarcely seems to heed;
For shelter'd places, bosoms, nooks, and bays,
And the pure mountains, and the gentle Tweed,
And the green silent pastures yet remain. ("Sixth Week", 159)

She describes well about the beautiful mountains, dales valleys, castle and other pleasing parts of the nature. The greenery of the beautiful trees in both the sides of the roads and the clean water of the rivers near by the road have glamorous images. Echoes of the mountains, dales and rivers create a harmonious environment there. Pretty Peebles of Scotland is much memorable town that they have visited in the borderland. The place is historically connected with the scenic of Edinburgh beauties.

24th September 1803 is a second last day of their travel's closing for this time. They start travelling very early in the morning to Longtown before breakfast. The road is rather narrow and steep. It is covered with oak leaves and the thorn bushes. They don't get good food to eat on the way, however they have to pass the difficult journey, anyway. They travel to a far distance nearly more than six miles and stop their travel for the day. They close this journey on 25th September 1803 having their breakfast at a public-house by the road side. They meet lots of people, places and things on the ways and the houses where they live. Despite the facts and fictions of their travel experiences, they end the Scottish travel this time with the mixed experiences of some melancholies, tiredness, pain, suffering on the one hand and some emotions, excitements, joys and pleasing moments on the other hand.

2. Theoretical Underpinning

Dorothy Wordsworth's travelogue *Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland* interconnects the parts of the nature-culture and the human relationships. Her travelogue creates a space in travel literature with Scottish images in the different landscapes. Narratives are based on ecological environment and the characters discuss on the challenges that might come in its future because of the human stupidity. Brain G. Wolff in "Environmental Studies and Utilitarian Ethics" asserts, ".....challenges the inferior moral standing of other species" (6). Wolff critiques anthropocentrism and the disasters that causes in the biosphere. The beautiful environment as described in this travelogue is in risk in the days ahead because of the negligence in the environmental ethics and the human activities that invites deforestation. It ultimately finishes the water resources, too. Easily understanding, nature is a backbone of human life, and so Wolff asserts again, "an adequate environmental ethics must be holistic, as opposed to individualistic, and make ecosystem and species the subject of direct moral concern" (7). Ecological environment and its connection with human beings is great as written by Wolff.

In the same line of Wolff, Dorothy Wordsworth focuses on environmental ethics and writes about her memories which she collected in travel with her brother and the other travelers. Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Science* focuses on the power politics and discusses about human supremacy. Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism and Orientalism: Western Conception of the Orient* both the texts discuss about the cultural practices and politicizes the issues. Challenging to

the Foucauldian discourses and Said's politics Ahmad Aijaz creates a different perspective. He questions the environmental issues of ecological consciousness whereas "people try to classify their positions" (34). They fight in each-other for their arts, culture and literature whereas they forget to save their own life as an environment itself is a part human and the humanity. Ahmad takes the power and practices, both, as an interdependent element of human-nature relationships. Thus, Dorothy's mixed-matched memories of traveling to the nature-gifted Himalayas, forests and the river banks create emotional triggers on the one hand and environmental disaster caused by human stupidities on the other hand. This travelogue can be studied from multiple perspectives as discussed by the above-mentioned theorists.

Dorothy's travelogue describes a picturesque journey both in the exciting and a melancholic tone. The mimicries of the high Himalayas, rivers, lakes dales and the dense forest of Scotland create an exciting environment to the travelers on the one hand and melancholic ecological disaster on the other hand. She writes, "The city and neighborhood of Carlisle disappointed me; the banks of the river quite flat, and, though the holms are rich, there is not much beauty in the vale....." ("First Week", 2). Dorothy has both the joyful and disappointing experiences of travelling and collecting memories in the Scottish geography. She seems happy enough while climbing the Himalayas and travelling in the beautiful environment. Meanwhile, she has some terrifying memories while observing the disastrous city environment.

Dorothy's observation has mixed remarks on the issues of nature, culture and human relationships. Life is not as easy as we perceive and so we have to face the challenges in every mode as Chinua Achebe claims. Regarding the complex journey, Achebe in "An Image of Africa: Conrad's Heart of Darkness" writes, ".....journey is blending reality with personal imagination" (375). Achebe writes about individual accounts prepared while travelling. As Achebe's claim Appadurai in *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimension of Globalization* highlights the power and takes it as "a cultural practice in travel" (12). Appadurai's references and recordings are close to the colonial writer's remarks. Dorothy suffers both mentally and physically; mentally in the sense that her friend Coleridge is sick and she is also disturbed to write and physically in the sense that her group has to cross the miles of difficult roads. Travelling and writing

in this sense is a difficult task that mixes the multiple memories and experiences collected from the ups and down movements.

Dorothy's impression in the travel of Scottish geography, especially travelling by the side of river bank, is close to John Hemming as expressed in *Trees of Rivers: The Story of the Amazon*, "The river is world's greatest river" (328). Amazon is geographically located in the different zones and the countries as said by Hemming however the river banks what she observed rounds are in the Scotland periphery. The environmental aesthetics of the river, mountains, hills and and jungle create a beautiful space in the Scottish literature. Dorothy in travel literature has generated multiple views for the conceptual changes as Slater in *Dance of the Dolphin: Transformation and Disenchantment in the Amazonian Imagination* writes, "geographic entity and province of the imagination provide space to think differently" (115). Slater highlights the imaginative geography. He makes a statement about Amazonian space in travelling and writes, "it is vast, incomprehensible, filled with wonder, and rich in life and culture" (125). The geographical observations in literature create the discourses on marvelous forest and the river as Stephen argues it as, "the unfamiliar, the alien, the terrible, the desirable, and the hateful" (23). Arts, culture and the literature-based travel account of Neil L. Whitehead are spell-bounding elements of the romantic history they are interlinked in Dorothy's narratives as a traveler and the romantic writer.

Romantic echoes of the mountains and forests in Wordsworth's writing re-echo the bubbling, sounding and thundering of rushing water that one can enjoy in the heart of the mountains, valleys and ditches. Alexander Von. Humboldt in the *Views of Nature: The Sublime Phenomena of Creation* writes, "people can delve and roar in the rain-foreboding howl of the bearded ape" (19-20). Humboldt's statement about the journey imposes a view to rethink on the travelling and learning differently. Humboldt suggests the people to be conscious about ecological environment and give a high value to the biosphere. Like Humboldt, Henry Bates is also talking about environmental ethics in *The Naturalist on the River Amazons* and writes, "marvelous diversity and richness of trees foliage in flowers" (180). Bates's concept is close to Mary Campbell, who in *The Witness and the Other World: Exotic European Travel Writing 400-1600* writes, ".....seeing is believing, [and] the impossibility of full enumeration" (179). Campbell focuses on travelling and writing as a

subject of eye witness whereas one can see himself/herself write about an objective truth. He/she gains the knowledge and writes confidentially and so it is much trustworthy and/or authenticated to write on the basis of self-observation and the collected experiences.

Dorothy is thus writing about the ecological-environment of Scotland through her own observations and experiences that she collected while travelling with her brother Wordsworth and a close friend Coleridge. This travelogue is a kind of first-hand knowledge collection and sharing material which is concerned with environmental ethics and the natural beauty. Dorothy's concern is on natural beauties that she has deeply studied about the mountains, dales, rivers, river banks, roads and the other environmental things in Scottish geography. Viewing the beauties with flora and fauna, Dorothy and her group members are applying the concepts of environmental ethics in this travelogue.

3. Methods and Materials

This paper is prepared in qualitative research method. The study is based on the text, library materials and online resources. It discusses and analyzes Dorothy Wordsworth's *Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland* from environmental and ecological perspective. Though facing some challenges in the journeys to mountains, jungles and sea-shores; the travelers are busy to study the nature and take some photographs in the beautiful environment and so this environmental study approach is connected with the mimicries. Brain G. Wolff, John Hemming, Henry Bates and Alexander Von. Humboldt's theoretical concepts help to excavate environmental beauties and the risk factors shown in Dorothy's narratives in a comparative framework. Picturesque collection helps to critique visual images mentioned in Dorothy's narratives which are based on ecological environment. Ahmad Aijaz, Edward Said and Michel Foucault's ideas are applied as additional support to critique the textual references. Critiquing the ideas of control over the natural resources, this researcher interconnects the views on environmental ethics of the theorists who speak against such authoritative voices.

4. Results and Discussions

Dorothy's concern in her travelogue *Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland* is on enjoying the beautiful nature and writing about it. The document can be a fresh memory to her on the one hand and the useful guideline to the travelers and the others who want to know

about Scotland on the other hand. She is much engaged to observe the things, take the photographs and note down the events in her diary. Viewing the beauties with flora and fauna, Dorothy and her brother William are applying the concepts of environmental ethics in the mixed method approaches. Their friends and the fellow travelers are discussing about nature, culture and the literature. This study, thus, is prepared in comparative method about environmental issues on the basis of travelers' remarks, critical reviews, online resources and the textual analysis. Dorothy and her group members in this journey are observing the forests, rivers and Himalayas from the traveler's eyes as said by Wolff but this researcher is applying the different tools and techniques in a comparative way to analyze the challenges seen in the environment. This study thus discusses on the travelling, observations, analysis and their results as a critique on environmental ethics that is applied in a comparative way.

This study discusses, critiques and brings some results on the basis of travel documents and again discusses on the results from an alternative perspective which plods the entire travel of Dorothy and her team in six weeks period. The travel of Scotland territory is made in August-September 1803. Dorothy Wordsworth, her brother William Wordsworth and ST Coleridge planned to travel in the different parts of Scotland and study on the environmental issues but Coleridge suffered of ill health on the way and he has to leave the group for few days. Dorothy's travel account highlights ecological environment-based concepts. She writes about the forest, rivers and the road condition of Scotland. The travelogue is often regarded as reality what one sees in the forests and the banks of the river and compares his/her imagination with the real world. Overwhelming natural resources and their beauties in Scotland are mentioned in this travelogue to exemplify eco-environmental ethics. She collects some differential memories and note downs them for the documentation of their experiences.

Dorothy has some mixed memories in an excitement on the one hand and melancholy on the other hand. She has the numbers of exciting events while travelling on the side of the river banks, horse riding and taking photographs in the beautiful sceneries. She has some painful memories, too, when Coleridge felt sick and they have to leave him from the group. She observes anthropocentric activities which are inviting the natural disasters and she is dissatisfied with the human stupidities. The activities which invite the environmental disasters surely create some disbalances in the near future. She is

worried that the people will be aware timely or not and how long this Scottish beauty will remain fresh. This travelogue gives us knowledge about environmental ethics and suggests to launch the things from biosphere perspective.

5. Conclusion

Dorothy Wordsworth in her travelogue writes about her observation, imagination, and the collected experiences of Scotland tour made in August-September 1803 for the six weeks period. Her excitement of the travelling is disturbed from the anthropocentric activities and so she writes about environmental ethics. She suggests to rethink from biosphere perspective for which picaresque journey and the mimicries are lively presented in her travel document. She writes about her collected experiences and the memories of the Scottish roads, river banks and the mountains where she learned a lot about nature, arts culture and the literature. Fresh experiences and memories that she collected from her trekking, tours and travels, in the river banks, high Himalayas and the dense forest with her brother Wordsworth and Coleridge enhances her knowledge in travelling and writing. Pictures taken while travelling are supporting documents to authenticate the narratives. Her travel account is prepared on the basis of her observations and imagination matching with the photos taken in Scotland while travelling there to note down the beauties of the forest and the rivers. This paper is prepared on the basis of the text, library materials and online resources. It discusses on the nature quests in search of aesthetics and critiques an anthropocentrism. She is worried about stupid activities of the people that bring possible dangers in the near future. Dorothy's beautiful memories of traveling to the nature-gifted Himalayas, forests and the river banks create emotional triggers that can be studied from multiple perspectives. Her narratives about the ecological-environment are covering the natural beauties on the one hand and human stupidity on the other hand.

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Nepal's Ethnic Struggles: From History to Political Assertion

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Abstract

Ethnicity remains a contentious issue in Nepalese politics, gaining prominence after the Second People's Movement in 2006. While the 1990 restoration of democracy highlighted identity and inclusion, marginalized ethnic groups continue to struggle against a historically centralized and exclusionary state. Despite federalism under the 2017 Constitution, ethnic representation remains disproportionately low, with less than 25 percent of parliamentary seats occupied by ethnic minorities. Over four election cycles—two for the Constituent Assembly (2008, 2013) and two for the federal Parliament (2017, 2022)—around half of Nepal's 126 ethnic groups remain unrepresented, underscoring persistent inequalities. Applying Theda Skocpol's structural approach, this paper examines Nepal's ethnic movement, assessing whether it constitutes a social movement or a revolution. Skocpol's framework—state crisis, institutional constraints, and international influences—helps analyze the movement's causes and impacts. This article uses archival research to synthesize existing studies and applies the historical-comparative method to analyze political transitions and social changes across time and space. While ethnic activism contributed to the fall of the Rana regime, the Panchayat system, and the monarchy, it has not led to a complete societal transformation like revolutions in France, China, or Russia. Instead, Nepal's ethnic movement aligns with new social movements prioritizing identity, self-determination, and cultural rights over radical economic change. The paper traces the movement's historical roots, from exclusionary policies under the Rana and Panchayat systems to indigenous activism post-1990. The Maoist insurgency (1996) further catalyzed ethnic demands for representation and autonomy, while international frameworks, such as UNDRIP, reinforced global support for indigenous rights. Despite these developments, structural inequalities persist, and the effectiveness of federalism in addressing ethnic grievances remains debated. By applying Skocpol's perspective, this study provides insights into Nepal's ethnic politics, representation, and federalism's evolving role.

Keywords

Ethnicity, Inclusion, Federalization, Constitution, Movement.

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Nepal's Ethnic Struggles: From History to Political Assertion

1. Introduction

Ethnicity remains a pressing and contentious issue in contemporary Nepalese politics, gaining significant prominence following the Second People's Movement in April 2006. The restoration of democracy in 1990 played a crucial role in bringing identity and inclusion to the forefront of Nepal's political landscape, leading to repeated movements advocating for the rights of marginalized ethnic groups. During the Rana and Panchayat regimes, ethnic minorities protested against the highly centralized political system dominated by high-caste Hindus. However, these movements were largely ineffective in bringing about substantial change. With the establishment of a republic and a federal governance structure following the promulgation of the new Constitution of Nepal in 2017, two general elections have been held. Despite these changes, ethnic representation in Parliament remains disproportionately low, with members from ethnic communities comprising less than 25 percent of the total 275 parliamentary seats. Although the state has recognized the rights of ethnic groups and their identities through federalism, the issue of their representation in state institutions continues to be widely debated.

The state of Nepal was historically built upon hierarchical caste structures, with high-caste Hindus benefitting from state privileges while ethnic groups faced marginalization (Hangen, 2010). From the unification of Nepal by Prithvi Narayan Shah to the enactment of the Muluki Ain in 1854, the state reinforced caste-based discrimination, privileging the Parbatiya elite. The Rana and Panchayat regimes further solidified Hindu cultural dominance, suppressing ethnic identities and imposing Nepali language and traditions. Even after the restoration of multiparty democracy in 1990, ethnic groups continued to face exclusion from political and economic power, fueling grievances that contributed to the Maoist insurgency and broader social movements seeking ethnic rights and inclusion. The Indigenous Nationalities Movement emerged as a response to these structural inequalities, with marginalized ethnic groups organizing to

reclaim their cultural, linguistic, and political rights. Various ethnic organizations, such as NEFIN, played key roles in advocating for indigenous rights, while international frameworks like the UN Declaration on Indigenous Peoples provided external support. The ethnic movement in Nepal aligns with Skocpol's structural perspective on revolution, as state oppression, internal grievances, and global influences have shaped its trajectory (Skocpol, 1979). While not a full-scale revolution, the movement has successfully challenged state policies and continues to push for autonomy and recognition, highlighting the ongoing struggle for ethnic equality in Nepal.

Political parties in Nepal have not taken a clear stance on ethnic rights, despite creating separate organizations to address the needs of ethnic groups. This ambivalence contributed to the current political deadlock. Ethnic groups demand recognition of their rights in the new political framework, but progress has been slow, leaving issues of identity and representation unresolved. The Nepali Congress and Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist) have expressed support for federalism based on ethnicity, language, and geography, but neither has clearly defined their stance on ethnic rights. Their reluctance to endorse a federal system based on ethnic identity, especially the single-ethnic provinces proposed by the Maoists, has played a significant role in the dissolution of the constituent assembly and the failure to promulgate a new constitution. However, political parties had made consensus on seven provinces and addressed in new constitution of 2017.

The ethnic movement in Nepal has sparked debates on social exclusion, political power, and identity. Some scholars, like Mishra, argue that the movement's core goal is to gain control over economic and political resources, rather than focusing solely on cultural or identity-based claims (Mishra, 2012). Meanwhile, Pandey highlights the missing class dimension in the discussions on inclusive development and the unequal distribution of power and resources (Pandey, 2010). Over the course of four election cycles—two for the Constituent Assembly in 2008 and 2013 and two for the federal Parliament in 2017 and 2022—around half of Nepal's 126 officially recognized ethnic groups remain unrepresented in Parliament. This persistent under-representation has fueled ongoing political discourse regarding the effectiveness of Nepal's federal system in addressing ethnic concerns. Beneath the broader ethnic movement in Nepal lies a complex web of debates and contentions, which

ultimately played a significant role in shaping the federal system and the new constitution. However, the effective implementation of constitutional provisions aimed at ensuring inclusivity remains an open question. This paper examines the evolution of ethnic politics in Nepal, analyzing its historical roots and the structural factors that have shaped its trajectory. By applying the structural Approach, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the ongoing debates surrounding ethnic representation and federalism in Nepal. This article employs an archival research methodology to systematically review and synthesize existing studies, providing a comprehensive understanding of the topic. In addition, it utilizes the historical-comparative method to examine past studies, texts, and cases across different time periods and socio-political contexts. By integrating these approaches, the study explores patterns of political transitions and social changes, offering insights into the evolving dynamics of societies over time.

2. Ethnicity and Indigeneity

Ethnicity encompasses shared cultural practices, perspectives, and distinctions that differentiate one group from another (Cornell & Hartmann, 2007). In essence, ethnicity represents a shared cultural heritage. Key characteristics that define various ethnic groups include ancestry, historical continuity, language, religion, and traditional attire. The concept of the “ethnic group” was introduced into social studies by Weber (1978), who described it as human groups that maintain a subjective belief in common descent, whether based on physical similarities, shared historical experiences such as colonization and migration, or both. This belief plays a crucial role in group formation, regardless of an actual biological connection. Ethnicity and race are distinct concepts: ethnicity is generally understood as the cultural identity of a group within a nation-state, whereas race is often considered a biological and/or cultural construct used to establish hierarchies of superiority and inferiority based on perceived biological differences (Barth, 1969).

In Nepal, the terms ethnicity and indigeneity are often used interchangeably, but they have distinct meanings. It is commonly assumed that all ethnic groups in Nepal are indigenous. The term indigenous originates from the Latin *indigena*, meaning “native” or “born within (the tribe).” Indigenous peoples are ethnic minorities who have been marginalized as their ancestral territories were

integrated into a modern state (Coates & Coates, 2004). They possess specific rights based on their historical ties to a particular land and their cultural or historical distinctiveness from politically dominant populations. In 2007, the United Nations adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to guide member states in formulating national policies that protect indigenous communities' collective rights, including their culture, identity, language, employment, health, education, and access to natural resources. (United Nations, 2008). Article 33 of the declaration is frequently referenced in national legal frameworks when defining indigeneity. It establishes two key principles: First, indigenous peoples have the right to determine their own identity or group membership according to their customs and traditions, without affecting their individual right to obtain citizenship in the states where they reside. Second, they have the right to determine the structures of their institutions and select their members in accordance with their own procedures.

3. State and Ethnicity

The modern state of Nepal was established in the second half of the eighteenth century, initiated by Prithvi Narayan Shah (1723-75), the founder of the Shah dynasty. The present boundaries of Nepal were solidified through the 1816 Treaty of Sugauli, following a two-year war with the British East India Company. The first significant caste division in Nepal's history occurred during the reign of Jaya Sthiti Malla (1382-95), who categorized the sixty-four castes of the Newars. However, earlier inscriptions from the Lichhavi period indicate the beginnings of the caste system (Gurung, 2008). This Hindu social code was later introduced in Gorkha by Ram Shah (1603-36). During state formation, high-caste Hindus, such as Chhetris, Thakuris, some high-caste Newars, and a few other ethnic groups, benefitted, while other groups faced economic hardships. Peasants across Nepal were burdened by land taxes and compulsory labor obligations to support the military complex (Hangen, 2010). Thus, inequalities began to emerge both before and after Nepal's state formation. Similarly, the process of Hinduization gained momentum following unification.

During the first century of the Rana period (1864-1951), Nepal's first comprehensive legal code, the Muluki Ain of 1854, was enacted, extending the Gorkhali rule over all people (Gurung, 2008). This further entrenched the political dominance of the three Parbatiya

castes (Bahun, Thakuri, Chhetri) and classified people into various caste hierarchies. At the top were high-caste Hindus, known as wearers of the sacred thread (Tagadhari), followed by the Matawali (alcohol drinkers), mostly non-Hindu and Mongoloid groups. These groups were further divided into Masine (eliminable) and Na-masine (non-eliminable). At the bottom were the impure, untouchable castes, with whom other groups could not share water. This caste hierarchy had significant political and economic implications, as only the higher castes could access state privileges.

During the Panchayat era (1962-1990), the state further solidified Nepal's identity as a Hindu society and promoted cultural homogeneity. The state advanced Hinduism, the Hindu Monarchy, and the Nepali language through the slogan "One language, one form of dress, one country" (*Ek Bhasa, Ek Bhes, Ek Des*), reinforcing cultural uniformity. The new legal code enacted by King Mahendra in 1962 removed statutory support for caste hierarchy, but Nepal remained a Hindu Kingdom, and Nepali was declared the official language (Hangen, 2010; Lawoti & Hangen, 2013).

By 1979, dissatisfaction with the Panchayat system had reached a peak, prompting the king to hold a referendum. However, the Panchayat system continued for another ten years. In 1990, the People's Movement, led by the Nepali Congress and a coalition of seven leftist parties called the United Leftist Front, resulted in the restoration of multiparty democracy after thirty years of autocratic rule. Despite this, large sections of society, particularly ethnic groups, remained politically excluded. Elites, mostly high-caste Hindus, dominated state power. Between 1990 and 2006, three parliamentary elections and two local elections were held, forming twelve governments. However, the pervasive discrimination and inequalities in Nepali society were never adequately addressed. In 1996, the Nepal Communist Party (Maoist) initiated a violent rebellion, drawing many ethnic groups into the struggle for full rights and identity. From the above account, it is evident that the state played a central role in institutionalizing discrimination and inequalities. As a result, ethnic inequalities increased, becoming a significant social movement in Nepal.

4. Indigenous Nationalities Movement

The indigenous nationalities movement in Nepal emerged over several decades. During the Rana and Panchayat regimes,

marginalized ethnic groups engaged in various forms of political action against the dominance of high-caste Hindus, ranging from rebellions to revitalization organizations (Hangen, 2010). Throughout the state-building process, many ethnic groups lost land to high-caste Hindus, and the state promoted the immigration of high-caste Hindus to eastern Nepal, implementing land tenure policies that favored these settlers. These settlers often acquired Limbu land by lending money, eventually capturing it. High-caste rulers also received payments from the British government by recruiting ethnic groups such as Gurungs, Magars, Rais, and Limbus into the British army. While these groups played an active role in Nepal's unification, they were excluded from state privileges and were regarded as possessing superior fighting abilities. The cultural homogenization and language unification process was further intensified during the Panchayat system.

In 1959, the Tamangs of Dhading and Nuwakot districts began rebelling against Brahmin moneylenders and landowners, accusing them of seizing Tamang land through unfair practices. In the 1940s, some Newars published magazines in the Newari language and formed Newari Literature Associations to promote their mother tongue. These activities, though disorganized and separate, were all attempts to reclaim lost rights. In 1949, the Tharu Kalyankari Sabha was established by Tharu elites to reform ritual practices and modernize their community. After the fall of the Rana regime in 1950, organized ethnic movements began to surface. In 1954, the Thakali Samaj Sudhar Sangh was established among the Thakalis to manage community events. In 1956, representatives from Gurung, Tharu, Limbu, and Magar organizations met to form the Pichadieko Bargiya Sangh (Backward Class Organization), which was later renamed the Samyukta Janakalyan Sangh, incorporating twelve ethnic groups. During the Panchayat period, a few more organizations were formed, such as the Kirat Dharma Tatha Sahitya Uthan Sangh, Nepal Bhasa Manka Khalah, and Tharu Kalyan Karini Pariwar, but organized ethnic movements had not yet fully materialized. However, the conditions for such movements were slowly ripening and would burst after 1990 with the end of the partyless Panchayat system (Hangen, 2010; Lawoti & Hangen, 2013).

After the 1990 political changes, indigenous nationalities were still under-represented in the parliament, cabinet, administration, and judiciary. Grievances among ethnic groups had been building since

the early stages of state formation. In the late nineteenth century, the Limbu people struggled to retain their ancestral land (kipat) against the state and high-caste Hindu dominance. After the restoration of multiparty democracy in the 1990s, organized ethnic movements gained momentum. The Nepal Janajati Adivasi Mahasangh (Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities, or NEFIN) was established, comprising 54 member organizations representing specific ethnic groups. Initially called Nepal Janajati Mahasangh, it began with only eight ethnic organizations. NEFIN raised public awareness about language rights, religious freedom, and cultural revitalization through pamphlets, annual meetings, and conferences in Kathmandu, focusing on topics such as "Education in the Mother Tongue." After 2002, NEFIN shifted towards more overtly political activities. In 2004, it staged street demonstrations protesting the royal takeover of October 2002. NEFIN played a vital role in the Second People's Movement, advocating for ethnic rights and the establishment of democracy. In 2007, NEFIN signed a 20-point agreement with the interim government, which promised proportional representation based on ethnicity in the Constituent Assembly. Ethnic political parties such as the Rastriya Mukti Party and the Mongol National Organization (MNO) raised awareness about ethnic rights, while the identity-based party Sadbhawana Party (NSP) campaigned to end the political discrimination against Madhesis. Ethnic political parties represented a more radical form of ethnic activism, aiming to gain direct political power for indigenous nationalities.

The Indigenous Nationalities Movement represents a new social movement, one that seeks to assert identity and defend cultural and economic rights. Ethnic groups, marginalized and excluded by the state, aim to politicize everyday life to address their hardships. Through political processes and resource mobilization, they apply pressure on the state. These groups are engaged in campaigns, fostering unity, commitment, and collective action to raise their voices and remove internal divisions. The state has been responsible for perpetuating discrimination and inequalities, failing to address the demands of ethnic groups. The armed struggle launched by the Nepal Communist Party (Maoist) in 1996 further raised awareness among ethnic groups about their rights and inclusion in state institutions, seeking their support for the armed struggle. Many ethnic people joined the Maoist movement, putting pressure on the government to resolve the inequalities prevalent in society and the

state. The MNO, aligned with the Maoists, took an active part in the armed struggle. Without the support of the ethnic groups, the Maoist armed struggle would not have achieved such success. Ultimately, it was the state's discrimination that compelled ethnic groups to engage in armed activities to obtain their rights (Hangen, 2010).

Another factor in the rise of the ethnic movement is the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples by the United Nations, which further raised awareness among ethnic groups about their rights. Support from international organizations has also contributed to the growth of the ethnic movement in Nepal. However, scholars and activists within ethnic groups argue that the state's oppression and discrimination, rather than the actions of international organizations, are the primary drivers of the movement.

5. Structural Perspectives and Ethnic Movement

We can analyze the ethnic movement in Nepal through Theda Skocpol's structural perspective to determine whether it constitutes a social movement or revolution and to explore its causes and impacts. This remains a subject of ongoing debate. Structuralism, as a theoretical paradigm, emphasizes systems or structures that are constructed through relationships or interactions among people, societies, or states. While structure is an essential variable in social science, it is often defined by Giddens. Skocpol (1979) employed structural perspective to analyze the revolutions in modern states, focusing on four theoretical perspectives: Marxism, Gurr's psychological theory, Johnson's Systems Value Consensus Theory, and Charles Tilly's political conflict theory. These theories, however, are not entirely sufficient for analyzing the causes of revolution. Skocpol (1979) argued that three necessary conditions for a revolution must exist: 1) an old regime state in crisis, 2) institutionally determined situations and relations of groups within society, and 3) interrelations of societies within world-historically developing international structures. Skocpol also contended that 'top-down' transformations could not prevent revolutions, as seen in the case studies of France, China, and Russia. Yet, critics argue that structural conditions alone are not enough for revolution or social movements; ideology, rational choices of groups, active mobilization networks, and coalition-building are equally important (Goldstone, 2003).

The ethnic movement in Nepal has been an ongoing process with a long trajectory of formation. The three conditions Skocpol identifies

are clearly evident in Nepal's ethnic movement, although it has not led to a full revolution within the country. First, ethnic inequalities in Nepal are state-made, enforced through various rules and regulations. The grievances arising from these inequalities have manifested as movements, but unlike a revolution, they have not resulted in a complete transformation of the society and state. Nevertheless, these movements have played a crucial role in ending the Rana regime, the Panchayat system, and even the monarchy. The ethnic movement's significance in the political history of Nepal cannot be overlooked.

During the Rana and Panchayat periods, the ethnic movement struggled to gain momentum because the state was strong enough to suppress it. Various laws were enacted that marginalized ethnic groups, such as categorizing them into the "Matwali" group and abolishing Limbu land rights. Ethnic groups were largely excluded from the state's privileges. When the Panchayat system ended in 1990, the state became politically and economically weaker, creating an environment in which the ethnic movement could gain ground. The movement began with the establishment of Nepal Janajati Adivasi Mahasangh (Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities, or NEFIN). The state's weakening was further compounded by the armed struggle initiated by the Nepal Communist Party (Maoist), with many ethnic groups supporting and actively participating in the struggle. Ethnic groups began demanding their identity and the establishment of autonomous provinces. They also played an important role in the Second People's Movement, which led to significant representation in the constituent assembly after the 2007 elections. Despite these gains, the state has yet to fully address the demands of ethnic groups, meaning the movement is ongoing and has the potential to continue influencing the political landscape. Thus, Skocpol's first condition—the existence of a state in crisis—is evident in Nepal's ethnic movement, although it has not resulted in a full revolution. However, it has demonstrated the capacity to change regimes and the prevailing unequal social structure.

The internal social structure of Nepal is also supportive of the ethnic movement. Various ethnic groups have united to launch a movement centered around identity and self-determination. They are a conscious, disgruntled mass, primarily composed of peasants and marginalized groups, who are disillusioned with the state and its discriminatory practices. International relations and structures also

provide support for the ethnic movement in Nepal. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, passed on June 29, 2006, recognized the rights of indigenous peoples, including the right to self-determination and the right to practice and revitalize their cultural traditions (United Nations, 2008). The declaration also emphasized that indigenous peoples should not be forcibly removed from their lands. The global discourse surrounding discrimination and inequality has helped raise awareness of these issues. Additionally, many international non-governmental organizations are ready to support the development of indigenous communities. As a result, Nepal's ethnic movement has benefited from international solidarity.

Although the ethnic movement in Nepal shares certain characteristics with a revolution, it is not a revolution as Skocpol defines it. Rather, it represents a new social movement that demands identity, self-determination, and collective action with shared goals, resource mobilization, and political processes (Calhoun, 1993). The ethnic movement has sparked numerous debates within Nepali society. While its outcomes are still not fully visible, the movement has already made significant impacts on the social structure of Nepal. As seen in the revolutions of France, China, and Russia, a similar revolution is unlikely to occur in Nepal in the near future. Marx (1848) defined revolution as a total change in the mode of production within society, but such a transformation has not occurred in Nepal. Even if the ethnic movement succeeds, a complete overhaul of the economic system seems unlikely.

6. Ethnic Diversity in Nepal

Ethnic diversity in Nepal is highly complex, with multiple and overlapping categories of identity. Specific ethnic labels have evolved over time (Hangen, 2010). The 2001 census recorded 100 ethnic and caste groups, 92 languages, and seven religions. The 2011 census identified 125 ethnic and caste groups, 123 languages, and at least ten religions. In the 2021 census, the number of ethnic groups slightly increased to 126 and 123 languages spoken across the country. Over this period, the number of recognized ethnic groups grew by more than twenty-five, though it is believed that some groups were still not included, suggesting that the actual number may be higher. These figures reflect the diverse ethnic and linguistic composition of Nepal, showcasing its rich cultural and linguistic heritage.

Table-1: Population of major ethnic and caste groups, 2021

Group	2001	%age	2011	%age	2021	%age
Chhetri	3,593,496	15.80	4,398,053	16.60	4796995	16.45
Brahmin-Hill	2,896,477	12.74	3,226,903	12.18	3292373	11.29
Magar	1,622,421	7.14	1,887,733	7.12	2013498	6.9
Tharu	1,533,879	6.75	1,737,470	6.56	1807124	6.2
Tamang	1,282,304	5.64	1,539,830	5.81	1639866	5.62
Newar	1,245,232	5.48	1,321,933	4.99	1341363	4.6
Kami	895,954	3.94	1,258,554	4.75	1470010	5.04
Musalman	971,056	4.27	1,164,255	4.39	1418677	4.86
Yadav	895,423	3.94	1,054,458	3.98	1228581	4.21
Rai	635,151	2.79	620,004	2.34	640674	2.25
Gurung	543,571	2.39	522,641	1.97	543790	1.86
Damai/Dholi	390,305	1.72	472,682	1.61	565932	1.94
Limbu	359,379	1.58	387,300	1.46	414704	1.42
Thakuri	334,120	1.47	425,623	1.61	494470	1.7
Others	5,538,166	24.37	6,477,065	24.45	7496521	25.66
Total	22,736,934	100	26,494,504	100	29164578	100

Source: Population Census (NSO, 2021)

According to the 2021 Population Census, Chhetri is the largest ethnic group, comprising 16.45% of the total population, an increase from 15.8% in the 2001 census. Following Chhetri are Brahmin-Hill, Magar, Tharu, Tamang, Kami, and Newar, with percentages of 11.29%, 6.9%, 6.2%, 5.62%, 5.04%, and 4.6%, respectively. The data from the 2021 census shows that indigenous nationalities collectively make up more than 30% of the total population, excluding Dalits and Madhesis. When including Dalits and Madhesis, the combined percentage rises to over 60% of the population, highlighting their significant role in Nepali society. This demographic shift underscores the prominence of ethnic populations in Nepal, indicating a need for their issues to be more effectively addressed by the state.

7. Political Parties and Ethnicity

Political parties in Nepal have yet to present a clear stance on ethnic rights even after the promulgation of new constitution of Nepal in 2017, despite establishing separate sister organizations to address the concerns of ethnic groups. The political ambiguity and

conflicting actions of these parties have contributed to the current deadlock in Nepalese politics. The ethnic movement continues to demand the recognition of their rights based on the constitution, but those demands remain unmet. Nepal cannot progress without a clear resolution on ethnic identities and rights.

The Nepali Congress, a major political force, has historically played a pivotal role in establishing democracy in Nepal, adhering to the principles of social democracy. It contributed to ending the century-long Rana regime in 1950 and led the first People's Movement in 1990 to dismantle the Panchayat system. It also signed a twelve-point agreement with the Nepal Communist Party (Maoist) to end the decade-long armed struggle. After the 2013 Constituent Assembly elections, Nepali Congress played a key role in abolishing the monarchy. The party's manifesto states that provinces will be determined by factors like national integrity, geographic feasibility, population, and the cultural majority of indigenous ethnic groups (Nepali Congress, 2013). However, Nepali Congress has yet to articulate a clear position on ethnic rights and federalism. It has mainly reacted to the proposals of the Maoists and the demands of ethnic groups, delaying decisions and rejecting the single-ethnic names for provinces, which has led to dissatisfaction among ethnic groups and Maoists. This indecision was a key factor in the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly without a new constitution.

The Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist) (CPN-UML) played a significant role in ending the Panchayat system and became a dominant force in post-1990 elections. It also contributed to the second People's Movement in 2006 to end the Maoist armed struggle and the monarchy. In the 2013 Constituent Assembly elections, it became the third-largest party. The CPN-UML's manifesto stated that restructuring should be based on ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and geographic characteristics (CPN-UML, 2013). However, like Nepali Congress, the CPN-UML lacks a clear vision on ethnic rights and federalism, rejecting single-ethnic based provinces while proposing multi-ethnic names. The party's controversial stance on ethnic issues led to the defection of over 500 members, including party Vice-President Ashok Kumar Rai, who formed a new party to advocate for ethnic rights.

The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), which launched an armed struggle in 1996, brought significant issues of Nepalese society, including ethnic rights and identity, to the forefront. Many ethnic groups supported the Maoists in their quest to end

state-imposed inequalities. Following the Constituent Assembly elections, the Maoist party emerged as the largest. It advocated for a single ethnic-based name for federal states, but this proposal was rejected by other parties, leading to a lack of political consensus and the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly. The Maoists suggested 11 autonomous provinces and three sub-regional units to address ethnic demands (CPNM, 2013). The failure to reach an agreement among major parties following the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly has left the country in a precarious situation, with the possibility of further political unrest.

Madhes-focused parties, including the Madhesi Jana Adhikar Forum, Nepal Sadbhawana Party, and Terai-Madhes Loktantrik Party, have demanded that the Madhes region be made into a single state. The issue of federalism has sparked debates, with some calling for more than three provinces for Madhes and others demanding a separate province for the Tharu community. The defeat of these parties in the second election for the Constituent Assembly has intensified the debate around federalism. This unresolved issue was a key factor in the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly. Although the government has called for new elections, a lack of consensus among major parties raises doubts about whether they will proceed.

In 2012, members from major political parties, frustrated by the failure to address ethnic rights, formed two new parties: Sanghiya Samajbadi Party and Sanghiya Loktantrik Party, indicating that ethnic issues remain unresolved. As a result, the political landscape in Nepal is shifting rapidly. The ethnic movement is gaining momentum, and the divisions within political parties over these issues are deepening. If the state does not address these concerns, the movement may escalate beyond control. Ultimately, political consensus was reached to establish seven provinces, a decision reflected in Nepal's new constitution of 2017. However, challenges surrounding ethnic rights and federalism persist, leaving the future of Nepalese politics uncertain.

8. The Debates on Ethnic Movement

The ethnic movement in Nepal has sparked numerous debates within Nepalese society. Some people question whether it is truly a movement, while others reject the groups involved, arguing they are not indigenous people. Mishra (2010) contends that the primary objective of the ethnic movement is to gain control over the means and relations of production, with ethnic identity being primarily a cultural

aspect, while the deeper aim is economic and, to some extent, political power. He further argues that the demands for self-determination and ethnic provinces are neither democratic nor justifiable. Mishra asserts that the definition and number of ethnic groups are flexible, depending on historical-political contexts. He views the current phase of the ethnic movement in Nepal, which calls for political and economic rights, as a shift from the previous phase, which focused on social exclusion and cultural/religious discrimination before 2006. Despite his clear stance, many scholars who support the ethnic movement disagree with Mishra's views, leading to ongoing internal debates about the true nature of these demands.

Pandey critiques the absence of class analysis in the discussions of inclusive development in the country. Echoing Mishra, he argues that current debates on social discrimination fail to fully address the core features of the issue (Pandey, 2010). He highlights how the ruling class in Nepal exercises domination through control over resources, centralized administrative processes, and patronization, thereby enlarging its privileges. Debates on state restructuring in Nepal often attempt to settle issues by creating a balance of power among different identity groups based on caste, ethnicity, gender, and religion. However, these discussions typically avoid addressing the relationship between the ruling class and the ruled, particularly within ethnic groups. The critical question that remains unaddressed in the current ethnic and identity movements is the control, distribution, and use of economic resources and political power, which continues to be overlooked in the broader debate.

On the international stage, the issues of ethnicity and indigenous movements have faced criticism. Kuper (2003) suggests that these movements align with the anti-immigrant policies of Britain and the U.S. during the 1980s, arguing that indigenous claims are politically motivated to preserve Europe from immigration. Kuper views these movements as a form of resistance to the modernization of ethnic groups, asserting that they are undemocratic. Similarly, some scholars argue that the ethnic movement is not purely about culture, but rather about social identity and efforts to integrate into the globalizing world (Friedman, 1999). In an era of globalization, the concept of a "pure culture" is increasingly irrelevant, as cultures are hybridized and constantly evolving. The indigenous issue, in this view, is part of a cultural politics shaped by Western interests, aimed at spreading capitalism following decolonization and the end of the Cold War.

These debates may obscure the real issues faced by ethnic groups in Nepal, who remain highly marginalized and excluded. While many prominent Nepali scholars focus on the social and cultural identity of ethnic groups and the oppression they face from the state, they often neglect the broader processes of globalization, the world system, and the economic inequalities within these groups. By overlooking these aspects, the debates risk becoming more problematic as Nepal's history progresses, further complicating the path toward meaningful solutions.

9. Conclusion

In conclusion, the ethnic movement in Nepal has a long history of development, emerging as a new social movement that gained significant momentum after the Second People's Movement of 2006 and the United Nations' Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Rooted in human rights, identity, and the social exclusion perpetuated by the state, the movement has sparked widespread discourse within Nepalese politics. It is characterized by collective behavior, resource mobilization, and political processes among ethnic groups. The structure of Nepalese society, including the state, internal class relationships, and the role of the international community, has all contributed to the rise of the ethnic movement. However, Nepal cannot progress without addressing the concerns of ethnic groups, as their rights and identity are intrinsically linked to the federalization of the state. Yet, it is important to note that federalization alone will not guarantee equality and the protection of ethnic rights. The politicization of the ethnic movement may, in some cases, hinder the true recognition of these rights and identities. As Pandey (2010) has argued, the class divisions within ethnic groups and the broader Nepalese society must not be overlooked in the discourse on ethnic rights. Additionally, as Mishra (2012) points out, it is crucial for ethnic groups to avoid isolation, recognizing that in an era of globalization, both individuals and groups are interconnected and confined within global processes.

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Evolution of Languages & Dialects in India Over the Ages: A Perspective

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Abstract

"Kos kos par pani badle, char kos par vani" the taste of water changes with every passing mile and dialect every four mile. Although the Indian subcontinent has been a home to hundreds of languages, dialects and sub-dialects, the existence of language continuum has kept the communication system intact. Having been subjected to innumerable annexations, India has witnessed myriads of geo-political, socio-cultural, and linguistic assimilations, amalgamations and vanishings take place within her fold. The imperialistic British rule sounded death knell for many indigenous traditional systems by hegemonizing the language. The 1835 Macaulay's speech on Indian Education system, wherein he loftily stated, ".....a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia....." bears testimony to a deeply colonial mindset. The regional languages and literatures have their own distinguished identities that contribute to the national repository. Since languages, cultures, traditions are all inextricably linked together, it is imperative that they get imbibed into the mainstream society through amendments and policy decisions and reinstated to its past glory. In this paper I would touch upon the linguistic diversity of India, the setbacks due to the colonial encounters, imposition of English language and the resultant far-reaching consequences that accompanied it. Shall deliberate upon the multiple changes in the Indian education system and the recently introduced National Education Policy 2020 which lays more emphasis on blended and experiential learning, that has attracted wide speculation and discussion in various academic forums at both national and international level. Shall also deliberate upon the way language has made a complete 360-degree shift in the way it is being used today.

Keywords

Indian education system, Multilingualism, Cultural diversity, NEP 2020, Internet language.

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Evolution of Languages & Dialects in India Over the Ages: A Perspective

1. Multilingualism

The multilingual, multicultural country like India that takes pride in its heterogeneity is quite at variance with other world countries that emerged post the World Wars believing majorly in the power of one territorial space, one language, one script, one tradition, one culture, one religion. But somewhere an important aspect of life was missed out wherein being human entailed embracing various cultures, traditions, languages, religions, voices, knowledge systems, so on and so forth. The journey from the Indus Valley script and Brahmi script of the BC era to the present writing systems has been an incredible one.

The movement and migration of people from the north brought their own culture, language, and ethnicity to India. One such language Sanskrit, in which were composed *The Vedas*, belonging to the Indo-European language family, was spoken by the Indo-Aryan people. It is to Panini, the renowned philologist and grammarian of the 5th century BCE, that the codification of Sanskrit language is ascribed. His grammar is regarded normative and has been in use uninterruptedly ever since. He had considerable influence on later linguists like Ferdinand de Saussure, Leonard Bloomfield and Edward Sapir. Sanskrit flowered in the classical period from the 1st to the 7th centuries AD. but since it was the language of the elite and scholarly and it was closely associated with the Brahminical religion, it gradually faded away and paved way for Prakrit, Apbransh and Khadi Boli which were more attuned to the common masses. The amalgamation of natural languages, dialects gave rise to modern Indo-Aryan languages of northern India - Hindi, Rajasthani, Gujrati, Punjabi, Marathi, Sindhi, Oriya, Assamese, Kashmiri, Dogri etc. Their names derived from the region where they were spoken. Since these regions did not have water-tight borders, languages merged on the margins retaining their individualistic distinctness and gave rise to newer dialects altogether, thereby embracing multilingualism in its fold. This is an essential fact of the multilingual, multicultural literary traditions of the Indian subcontinent. It is difficult to pinpoint

where one language stops and the other begins. Their amalgamation has been seamless. According to the Ministry of Education, Government of India official website, today India is home to “1,652 mother tongues including 103 foreign mother tongues” (Census 1961 & Nigam 1972: p. xv).

2. Consequences of Multiple Annexations on India's linguistic Heritage

Having been subjected to innumerable annexations, India has witnessed myriads of geo-political, socio-cultural, and linguistic amalgamations and vanishings take place within her fold since time immemorial. Each new and subsequent invasion transformed the language, culture, literature, social, personal life of the people. In these cultural assimilations, the local indigenous languages and dialects got subsumed into the more dominant ones of the ruling powers and a hybrid language emerged. These creoles were a mixture of elements from multiple languages and often served as a means of communication between diverse communities. Annexations also paved way for language shifts wherein the language of the ruling elite became the language of administration and culture. Some indigenous languages received state patronage and some wilted away under the impact. During the British colonial rule, English was widely promoted as the language of education and governance in India. It led to greater linguistic pluralism and cultural syncretism within the nation state. Its effect can be seen in literature, art, music, and religious traditions that draw from multiple linguistic and cultural sources. India's linguistic landscape is a testament to the country's ability to absorb and adapt to diverse influences while still maintaining its rich heritage. The British rule introduced the Indians to the Western-style of education that widened their mind-space on one hand and on the other, paved way for the marginalization of indigenous languages and knowledge systems.

For a land as culturally and linguistically robust as India, the imposition of English over other Indian languages did more harm than good. The political, cultural, and linguistic imperialism of Britishers sounded the death knell for many indigenous traditional systems. The 1835 Macaulay's speech on Indian Education system, wherein he loftily stated, “.....a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.....”. bears testimony to a deeply colonial mindset. For personal aggrandize-

ment, they razed the entire edifice of a country which was already on its knees. Since English was the language of the elite, the dominant, and the master class, it soon became a language of aspiration and upward mobility for natives, weaning them away from their roots and culture. The English educated youth began to look down upon the regional culture, and preferred using English over their native tongue, paving way for their gradual decline.

3. Fading of Regional Languages

Languages are dynamic, the more one uses them, the more they flower and flourish, embracing the differences within its fold. The flipside is also equally true. A continued disuse by the native speakers over a long period of time paves way for its disappearance. The disowning or abandoning a language leads to it becoming moribund as the native speakers make a conscious language shift to a more advantageous linguistic system for their communication needs. The elders stop speaking that language and the youngsters stop learning it. The powerful and dominant languages continue to wield their power and presence. They continue to occupy the mind-space of speakers, luring them to prioritize their languages in a way that it leads to the disuse of the other. The death of a language is the death of a community's link with its historical past. Regional/tribal/heritage languages face the threat of becoming moribund unless steps are taken towards their patronage, preservation, and promotion. Adrija Roychowdhury, in her 3rd May 2020 article in The Indian Express, titled, 'Cultural invisibility - India's 600 potentially endangered languages' quotes G.N. Devy, who opined that *"as per the survey conducted by People's Linguistic Survey of India in 2010, there are 600 potentially endangered languages in India... each dead language takes away a culture system"*.

4. Causes of Moribundity

Some probable reasons behind the disuse and disappearance of regional languages in India could be enumerated as:

- **Colonisation & Imperialization:** As the colonizer gains control over a territory, the native ingenuity of the colonized people gets compromised as he gets enticed to imbibe their culture and the language, considering it as the status symbol. The inherent need for social acceptance, personal aspirations, career opportunities lure him away from his regionalities.

- **Economic and Social Gains:** Economic and social advantage incentivizes people to adapt to the language and cultures of the dominant class. Initially they face multiple roadblocks and challenges in embracing the foreign culture, but gradually tide over them. With subsequent generations, the gap between the two collapses and the change-over is complete.
- **Social Mobility:** Urbanisation, migration and mass movements motivate people to absorb the language and culture of their work-region to ensure smoother and hassle-free communication, which in turn disrupts their own rootedness.
- **Globalisation:** The easy transcending of geographical boundaries, interconnectedness and communication has led the world to become one big global village. A continued interface between various languages and cultures, may bring about enrichment of cultures and cultural markers, it also leads to hybridity, homogenisation and decline of linguistic diversity. With an increase in interconnectedness, communication has become relatively smoother and hassle-free, and consequently, the regional languages that are more vulnerable, get dominated by the dominant global languages
- **Ethnic Cleansing:** The term has been often used as a synonym of genocide, a practice to wipe out the very existence of a particular indigenous community, their distinctive culture, tradition, and language for some politico-religious gain. The promotion of singular national language, culture and identity or expansionism, colonialism or political repressionism often leads to extermination of the native cultures of indigenous minorities. History is replete with such instances. The most prominent example of the Holocaust is the one that was carried out by Nazi Germany against the Jewish population from 1938 - 1945 wherein an estimated 6 million Jews were killed inside Germany and German occupied territories. Similarly, the persecution of the Uighurs, an ethnic minority community in China is believed to be orchestrated by the Chinese Government.
- **Languages, Cultures, and Ethnicity:** Languages, cultures, and ethnicity also get hugely impacted by wars, violence, natural as well as manmade disasters.
- **Intermarriages:** Intermarriages can smother the language of less dominant partner, paving way for its decline.

- » **Cultural and Linguistic Imperialism:** Cultural and linguistic imperialism can also sound a death knell for less dominant languages. There were widespread protests and agitation when there was a move to declare Hindi as the official language of post independent India. Even today, when India has implemented the three-language formula under NEP 2020, there is a trust deficit between the northern Hindi speaking belt and the southern parts with different Dravidian languages.
- » **Advancement in Technology:** This is one of the major reasons behind the fading away of local/regional languages as newer linguistic systems emerge and take over the mind-space of people. A detailed discussion on this is followed under “Technology & Language”.

5. Preservation of the Indigenous/Regional Languages

In a multilingual country like India, there is a glaring need for a proactive, concerted, and multi-faceted effort to save regional languages from fading away into extinction. Some of them are enumerated as:

- » **Introduction of Language Immersion Programmes:** It has become imperative to introduce them from the grassroot level of education. Here two languages (L1 & L2) are used for the purpose of providing instruction to the young learners. L1 is the child’s native language and L2 is the second language that is taught. This would help in fostering bilingualism and biculturalism.
- » **Community-based Initiatives:** Several community-based initiatives like language-speaking courses and cultural revitalization activities could be introduced which would provide greater impetus to indigenous languages.
- » **Specialized Training:** Intergenerational learning could be facilitated wherein experience sharing activities, story-telling sessions, mentorship programmes and workshops could be held. The teachers and instructors could be provided specialized training with appropriate pedagogical methods to teach indigenous languages through celebrating festivals and cultural programmes.
- » **Technology:** Technology such as online language learning apps like Duolingo, Hello Talk, Babbel etc. could be promoted

and popularized to facilitate learning, understanding, and communicating in other languages. Online dictionaries, and digital archives could be made user friendly. Indigenous programmes could also be created through radio, television, online videos, social media handles to expose audience to language nuances.

- » **Promoting Language Diversity:** The government should ensure that lesser known and minority languages are not discriminated against and work towards promoting language diversity. It could provide Funds, Grants and scholarships for linguistic projects and schemes in different languages, and provide patronage and protection to Language Schools and Labs. Additional languages could be introduced at school levels.

6. Dynamic Education Policy

The rich, cultural, linguistic heritage of a nation could be kept alive through dynamic education policy as education plays a key role in building great society, it helps bridge gender inequalities, financial disparities, and social dissimilarities. Indian Education system has witnessed multiple changes over the years. It has come a long way from the traditional Gurukul system where gurus imparted indigenous knowledge, moral values, and life lessons to their students through self-learning exercises. The shishyas were encouraged to be self-dependent, master of every field, well versed in all art form, be it sport or warfare or administration. They were taught calmness, positivity and self-control, self-discipline, mindfulness through meditation and yoga. They were initiated into mental, spiritual, and physical well-being and fitness of the self and of others so that they face the world with equanimity. The journey from then to the present has been a dynamic one.

Education today, as per the United Nations guidelines, has been accorded the fourth and important SDG as it is also a potential weapon of dominance for the mighty, which if used indiscriminately might lead to far reaching consequences. It has the wherewithal to make or break societies, give them a twisted slant for their own nefarious goals. The lowering of educational standards of a country may produce average citizens with substandard value systems. It therefore, becomes imperative to keep a close eye on the wholesome upbringing of its people. Both the government and the people need

to be vigilant as they play an important role in its sustenance. Keeping in mind, the overall wellbeing of its people, the government of India has introduced the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.

7. National Education Policy 2020

National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, unveiled by the Government of India, is a landmark reform that envisions a transformative and inclusive education system. Introduced in the year 2020, it calls for a complete overhaul of the Indian education system, bringing it at par with the global standards. The prime focus is making quality education accessible, available, and flexible for everyone, ensuring 100% literacy rate in India. It is a self-paced learning system that has components of internships, blended, and experiential learning.

7.1 Focus on Mother Tongue and Regional Languages

NEP stipulates that primary education should be provided in the child's mother tongue/ home language/ regional language till at least 5th standard. All institutions of Higher education (HEI), technical institutions should ensure bilingual medium of imparting instruction and make books and other study material available. This would help in fostering all-round growth and development of young learners, providing a more holistic approach in addressing their cognitive, social, emotional, and physical needs. Guidelines have been issued by the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) to all the educational institutions to ensure that they offer courses in regional languages also. It has developed automated artificial intelligence tools for translating English courses into various Indian languages. SWAYAM MOOCS portal has made available the translation of reference study material for some courses. DIKSHA, the government portal has made the school text books available in all regional languages and sign language too. In fact, now JEE and NEET exams are also conducted in various Indian languages. As per the official website of the Government of India, (<https://www.education.gov.in/language-education>), the Language Bureau under the Ministry of Education, with the help of various autonomous institutions and organizations work toward the promotion and development of various Indian languages that are enlisted in the 8th schedule of the Indian Constitution. The Indian Language policy is pluralistic in its nature and scope and ensures survival, development, and promotion

of all Indian languages, irrespective of their nature and status of being a major, minor, tribal, or regional language.

Presently, India has six Central Universities for the promotion of languages, out of which three are for the promotion of Sanskrit language and one each for English and Foreign Languages, one for Hindi and one for Urdu, funded by the University Grants Commission (UGC). (<https://www.education.gov.in/language-education>).

7.2 Technology & Language

The advancement in technology has hugely impacted the linguistic patterns both positively and otherwise too. Apps like Duolingo, Babbel, Hello Talk, Drops, Mondly, Memrise etc. have made learning, understanding and communication in other languages simple, fun, and conversational since the learner is not bound by the harsh class timing or fixed schedules. They have eased international travels as it is now easier to communicate with others who follow different linguistic system.

AI tools, ChatGPT and other such bots have added a newer dimension to language by changing how people learn, read, write, and express themselves. The flip side is that they have also led the written expressions to become largely homogenized - making everything sound mundane and monotonous, thereby taking away the uniquely individualistic styles and mannerisms. It has led users to imitate the style of their icons and make it their own, thus compromising on the originality of expression. The use of AI also reinforces the existing hierarchies by giving greater precedence to the already dominant language system of SAE - Standard American English and the Queen's English over others. Since there are many varieties of English that exist, any deviation from it is not treated kindly. Since tools like these operate on large language models (LLM), they respond to human commands by delving into the massive archives without understanding the finer nuances of the words used. Its responses are heavily based on the oft repeated stylistic patterns, structures, and forms, which itself leads to sidestepping the lesser dominant ones. The perpetuation of the dominant modes of writing and expressions is a proof enough that it is under the patronage of more assertive powers. Its default setting is configured in such a way that certain linguistic systems are regarded as normative. The fact that the non-normative ones require a special command, suggests that the

euro-centric ones still wield power, as the rest get pushed to the margins. Schools and Universities expect standardized responses in discipline centric languages for its students to clear the examinations. Those who fail, are regarded as lacking the competence and capacity to communicate properly. Popular perception and acceptance of what is normative is likely to give rise to certain types of behaviour in non-performing students. It may lead to lack of interest and absenteeism, anxiety, low self-esteem, inferiority complex, disengagement, decreased commitment in them.

To overcome these challenges, it becomes imperative for all to invest more time and money to develop the required competence for better communications, making it a level playing field for people with diverse backgrounds. The teachers, educators, and instructors should be sensitive to the need of the hour and desist from taking the language related assumptions for granted and redesign courses so as to accommodate students from different background.

7.3 Language Today

Since language helps in expressing and communicating with others, and is closely associated with cultural, social, and psychological phenomenon, the way words and phrases are being used, also provide a peep into people's mindset. Language today has undergone a considerable change. It has not only become short and crisp but more conversational and colloquial, reflecting the highly advanced, technologically savvy users who aren't averse to endless experimentations with words, symbols and pictures. They use the highly jargonized language of SMS's, abbreviations, acronyms, and emojis. The casual and contemporary style of expression is completely geared to suit the online digital culture wherein are present plethora of social media platforms, like Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat etc. and the reliance is more on slangs and peer-lingo of the specific group. There is a noticeable change that can be seen in the way that the young use language to express themselves while communicating with each other. Expressions like "TTL" (talk to you later), "LOL" (laugh out aloud), "BRB" (be right back) or "PAW" (parents are watching), "GOAT" (greatest of all times) so on and so forth. The list is endless and it does not really make much sense for the older generation. It is like some shorthand secret code that conveys messages effectively through instant messaging services like Snapchat, Messenger, Facetime, WhatsApp, Telegram

etc. Phrases like, therefore, or nevertheless or in fact, notwithstanding, Oh my God, etc. probably require too many taps to type for the impatient youth. As a result, a whole new set of vocabulary has come into vogue with terms like, “viral”, “friendzone”, “selfie”, “tweet”, “retweet”, “staycation”, “ghosting” etc. that bear testimony to the fact that languages are constantly changing. “Memes” is another popular online digital dialect that very aptly creates and expresses meaning using wordplay, pictures, images, videos, GIFs etc.

The trends and pop culture give less emphasis on grammatical rules, spellings etc. keeping the communication instant, informal and short. There are some arguments too that youngsters nowadays have been adversely affected by technology as they rely heavily on tools like Grammarly, Spellcheck, Auto-correct etc. to aid them in their work. *“Adolescents are the linguistic movers and shakers, at least in western industrialized societies, and as such, a prime source of information about linguistic change and the role of language in social practice”* (Eckert, 1997: 1). The world over, linguists and researchers are trying to carve out relationship between language and adolescents. The younger generation are keen to embrace various social and linguistic changes brought in by technology. So, to understand the changing linguistic patterns, what need to be studied is how languages are being used by the young.

Describing how and why it is socially important for teenagers to play with language, Mary Kohn, Assistant professor at Kansas State University, in her article titled, “Teenagers’ role in language change is overstated, linguistics research finds” published on Jan.14, 2016, in K-State News, writes, *“All languages, throughout history, change as generations grow up and move through life,”* Kohn said, *“As long as there are people who are living and breathing and speaking, we’re going to invent new words. We’re going to invent new ways of speaking”*. <https://www.k-state.edu/media/newsreleases/jan16/kohn11416.html>

8. Conclusion

Language, like human society, is a dynamic entity, it is always in a flux, it lives, breathes, adapts, and evolves itself constantly by embracing newer words and vocabulary in its fold. Language transforms itself by imbibing phonetic, syntactic, and semantic changes within itself. The world has become one big global village with blurred boundaries, encouraging amalgamation of cultures and

languages which has led to the creation of an entirely new linguistic system with words and grammatical structures borrowed and absorbed from different languages. Hinglish, a mix of Hindi and English (code-switching and code-mixing) is an apt example of this. As technology advances, the language also evolves further inventing newer ways to convey and communicate complex ideas efficiently with least ambiguity. The present populace with smart phones and technology at their fingertips, are creating tech-jargon that is adding newer dimensions to the present lingo. Siri, Alexa, Google, the virtual assistants have earned their place in dictionaries. Meaning of the words also are no longer static, their nuances change with changing times. “Nerd” for example had a negative connotation earlier but today it is used as a corollary for a person who is a reliable and expert. The young users are rewriting dictionaries and thesauruses with their ever-increasing innovative use of language, which though might be a trifle complicated for old-schooled generation to decipher but it is a sure sign of language transformation.

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Exploring Approaches to Environmental Challenges: India and Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

Global environmental challenges, particularly climate change, are increasingly at the forefront of political discourse, drawing significant attention both at the national and international levels. Now a days climate change creates difficult policy considerations for all nations. India is obligated to improve living conditions for its 1.4 billion citizens while simultaneously serving a significant role in reducing global GHG emissions. While the government has implemented various policies to promote renewable energy adoption and reduce dependence on coal, further efforts are essential for India to successfully achieve its net-zero targets by 2070. The Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest vulnerability to climate change globally. The increasing natural disasters are being driven by rising sea levels, escalating temperatures, and irregular rainfall patterns, all of which are profoundly reshaping the region's landscape. The 4th assessment report of IPCC projected that by 2020, climate change-induced water stress could impact between 75 and 250 million people across Africa, exacerbating water scarcity and posing significant challenges to livelihoods and development. Despite Africa's remarkable progress climate change, droughts, floods, shifting rainfall patterns, and the potential to derail efforts to combat hunger and accomplish the goals established in the Paris Agreement and 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development still remains critical. An extensive overview of the existing climate policy and adaption strategies in India and Sub-Saharan Africa provides in the present article.

Keywords

Climate change, Sustainable development, Renewable energy, GHG, Poverty, Hunger.

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1. Introduction

Climate change compels policymakers to navigate complex trade-offs, balancing the urgent need to accelerate climate adaptation and reduce reliance on fossil fuels with the economic implications of such transitions. While new regulatory frameworks are essential to drive these changes, they may, in the short term, affect GDP and create disparities, inevitably shaping both beneficiaries and those who face challenges in the process. The yearly cost of making the shift to net zero in 2050 is estimated to be as high as US \$9.2 trillion (Krishnan, 2022). India is not an exception to these compromises and is seeing a rise in the dangers associated with climate change. Between 1950 and 2018, average temperatures increased by 0.5°C, while average rainfall declined by 0.6 meters. More critically for India, weather patterns have become increasingly unpredictable, with some regions experiencing temperatures consistently surpassing 50°C and the monsoon season growing more erratic in both timing and intensity of rainfall. States are not all affected equally, and the economy's weather-dependent industries-such as transportation and agriculture-are suffering (Chateau, 2023). Pollution and climate change are also having a negative impact on health outcomes. The same activities that contribute to global climate change also frequently cause large amounts of pollution locally, which has detrimental effects on people's health. Research indicates that in 2019, pollution in India led to an estimated \$8 billion in production losses due to illness and \$28.8 billion in economic losses resulting from premature deaths. The burden of these impacts fell disproportionately on the country's most vulnerable populations, exacerbating existing socio-economic disparities (Chateau, 2023). It is projected that between 2030 and 2050, the effects of climate change would result in an extra 250,000 fatalities year from heat stress, diarrhea, malaria, and malnutrition (Rajput, 2022). India ranks as the world's third-largest emitter of greenhouse gases (GHGs); however,

its per capita emissions remain the lowest among G20 nations. In comparison, the United States emits seven times more per capita than India, while India's total emissions slightly exceed those of the EU, despite being only 1/3 of the EU's per capita emissions. India's contribution to world historical cumulative GHG emissions is very tiny, at about 3 percent, considering that its modern economic growth started much later than that of advanced nations (UNEP, 2022). India's contemporary policy trajectory has led to a steady rise in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, with historical emissions showing a consistent upward trend since 2014. The energy sector remains the largest contributor, accounting for 37% of total emissions, followed by agriculture at 21%, industry at 17%, and transportation at 9%. India aspires to move from lower to upper middle-income status, which would result in increasing power demand (Stanley, 2022). However, this development trajectory is expected to raise GHG emissions by 41% by 2030, exceeding the Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) objective of 45% decrease in GDP emissions intensity by 2030 compared to 2005 levels (Thube, 2021). Additional mitigation initiatives are required to match India's emission trajectory with its long-term objectives.

The urgent need for climate change adaptation is essential not only to safeguard developmental progress but also to ensure the well-being and resilience of vulnerable communities facing its most severe impacts. Systems that are resilient are essential for human, economic, and environmental growth. Climate resilience is especially important for fragile nations that depend on resources that are susceptible to climate change. Africa's least developed nations are very vulnerable yet lack the ability to adjust. Climate unpredictability threatens African economy and millions of people's livelihoods. To overcome this, climate change issues must be included into sub-Saharan Africa's socioeconomic development activities. Enhancing socioeconomic circumstances including health, education, and social welfare via investment increases the ability of communities to adapt and become more resilient. This investment holds the potential to enhance revenue streams, enabling governments to allocate resources toward climate-related public goods and fortify essential services-such as healthcare, infrastructure, and water supply systems-that are increasingly at hazard due to climate change. The Global Environment Facility Least

Developed Countries Fund (GEF-LDCF) provides around US\$1.3 billion in voluntary contributions for adaptation initiatives, with an emphasis on implementation and inclusion. Financing for adaptation must pay particular attention to fragile and conflict-affected nations, which frequently coincide with the least developed ones. As part of the Paris Agreement, the GEF will continue to take the lead in adaptation by integrating climate change into policy and assisting in efforts to increase ecosystem and human resilience around the world (Chevallier, 2008).

2. Strategies for Environmental Challenges in India

Both government and citizens are essential to reducing perils and enhancing the resilience to vulnerable populations of the world ensuring their ability to resist and recover from environmental challenges. While they cannot be completely eliminated, adaptation measures can lessen the effects of climate change in the short run. If we don't slow down climate change, the effects will become so great that adaptations won't work in the long run. Mitigation is the process of reducing greenhouse gas emissions in order to prevent the continuation of the present and historical emissions-driven climate change. It involves changing how people, organizations, and businesses create and consume energy, altering practices to cut down on or completely eliminate emissions, and creating efficient and clean infrastructure in places where it doesn't already exist. Rather than being viewed as mutually exclusive approaches, adaptation and mitigation should be explored in tandem (Kundu, 2013). The following are a few of the main programs or initiatives that significantly address variation aims:

1. Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana
2. Mahatma Gandhi Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana
3. Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana
4. Disaster Management
5. Accelerated Rural Water Supply Programme
6. National Rural Health Mission
7. Sustainability of Dryland/Rainfed Farming System
8. Major and Medium Irrigation and
9. Desert Development Programme

These collective efforts have ultimately led to a successful shift, where the expansion of the energy sector is no longer directly tied to overall economic growth, demonstrating a more sustainable development trajectory. The Indian government has established a “Expert Committee on Impacts of Climate Change” to determine future actions India may need to take to address its vulnerability to the effects of anthropogenic climate change. The National Action Plan on Climate Change, developed under the oversight of the Prime Minister’s Council on Climate Change, underscores the government’s commitment to mobilizing national efforts in addressing the pressing challenges of climate change. At its core, the plan prioritizes following eight key national missions, each playing a pivotal role in fostering climate resilience and sustainable development:

1. Jawaharlal Nehru National Solar Mission (JNNSM)
2. Energy Conservation and Efficiency
3. National Mission on Strategic Knowledge for Climate Change
4. National Mission for Sustaining Himalayan Ecosystem
5. National Water Mission
6. Green India Mission
7. National Mission on Sustainable Habitat (NMSH)
8. National Mission for Sustainable Agriculture

An environment challenge adaptation approach improves ecological sustainability. Under the NAPCC, eight national missions were established, each concentrating on a distinct facet of development, adaptation, mitigation, and sustainability. On the global stage, India reaffirmed its commitment to climate action by submitting its third Biennial Update Report (BUR) on emissions levels, along with a revised Nationally Determined Contribution, to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in 2022. The new NDC committed India to reducing its GDP’s emissions intensity by 45 percent from 2005 levels by 2030, on top of its prior commitments. India has also committed to advancing and mainstreaming a sustainable and health-conscious way of life (LiFE) while setting an striving mark of attaining 50% of its fitted power size from non-fossil fuel-based energy sources by 2030, at COP26, India also pledged to reach NZE by 2070 (Chandran, 2013).

3. Indian Financial Support for Mitigation and Adaptation

According to the Reserve Bank of India's 2021 Financial Stability Report, climate change-along with the policy measures designed to mitigate its impact-is poised to redefine the broader macroeconomic and financial landscape. Effectively curbing future emissions and securing the necessary funding for adaptation efforts will require substantial investment to ensure long-term resilience and sustainability. In their 2016 Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC), India projected that, at 2014-15 prices, at least US\$ 2.5 trillion will be needed to achieve their climate change objectives between 2016 and 2030 (Vishwanathan & Garg, 2020). Furthermore, according to projections from the International Energy Agency, machinery and infrastructure that does not yet exist would account for close to 60% of India's CO₂ emissions in the late 2030s (Vishwanathan *et al.*, 2018). Over the next 20 years, an additional US\$ 1.4 trillion in financing will be needed if this investment is to be sustainable (beyond the amount needed for existing policy). In India, which might supply part of this finance, green bond issuance now makes up a very modest percentage of total bond issuance, similar to much of the rest of the globe. Nonetheless, the rate of issuance is rising; in 2022, US\$ 21.6 billion worth of green, sustainable, or social bonds were issued. Additionally, the Indian government entered the green finance sector in 2023 by issuing US\$ 2 billion in green bonds to pay for expenditures on afforestation, green hydrogen, and solar electricity, among other projects. We should anticipate seeing more of these issued in the future because they were able to receive a greenium, which entails cheaper financing costs than other identical bonds. Other financial markets also present significant prospects. For example, the creation of a derivatives market to facilitate adaptation through the provision of products like agriculture commodity derivatives, which offer hedging and enable ongoing price discovery, can help lower risks and weather derivatives, which help reduce the risk associated with low-risk, high-probability occurrences. Fulfilling the finance requirements for climate change entails the standard financial risk associated with any lending. Based on an estimate by the RBI, 10% of all outstanding non-retail bank credit is directly related to fossil fuels, such as power, chemicals, and automobiles. As such, the impact on the banking system should be

minimal. It also points out that a lot of other businesses also utilize fossil fuels inadvertently, thus their effects also require careful observation (Nelson, 2023).

4. Africa's Response to Environmental Challenges: Worldwide Mitigation

The world community has put up a plan to lessen climate change's detrimental effects in Africa, which calls for concurrent action on two fronts: adaptation and mitigation. Reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions remains an urgent priority for both developed and developing economies. Presently, atmospheric carbon dioxide levels have reached their highest concentration in the past 800,000 years, underscoring the critical need for immediate and sustained action, these numbers will keep rising if nations carry on with their "business as usual" practices (Chevallier, 2008).

However, the degree of their mitigation efforts will dictate whether or not future hazardous climate change can be prevented. There are several strategies for lowering emissions of carbon dioxide, these include a greater reliance on clean technology and renewable energy sources, as well as coordinated efforts to stop land degradation and deforestation (Climate Adaptation Archives, n.d.). Adaptation strategies must be implemented in addition to mitigation efforts. These reflect of many strategies to deal with developing nations' susceptibility to current and future consequences of climate change as well as its attendant risks. It is essential to acknowledge, specifically in the African context, that a nation's susceptibility to climatic variability is contingent upon its government's capacity to optimize the allocation of natural resources and energy supply. Support in the form of institutional, financial, technical, and capacity building is frequently required to help developing countries make the transition to more sustainable development paths (Brown, 2007). In Africa, discussions surrounding climate change mitigation and adaptation are still in their nascent stages, gradually gaining momentum as the continent navigates the complexities of sustainable development and resilience-building. The industrial North's mitigation initiatives are now the major topic of conversation, with less emphasis placed on the adaptation strategies that other global stakeholders will need to put in place. This

misguided strategy has several causes, all of which hamper the development of the political will required to actually implement mitigation and adaptation plans throughout Africa. It's critical to influence public opinion before the leaders of the continent can commit to a proactive and comprehensive climate change agenda a top priority, it's critical to dispel the myth that development goals and climate change duties are mutually exclusive. Fossil fuel-based electricity, which includes coal, which is quite abundant in many African nations, has large greenhouse gas emissions but is relatively inexpensive to create. For instance, the most lucrative industries in South Africa are those with high carbon intensity, and the nation produces around 50% of its power from coal. Shifting South Africa's growth trajectory toward a more carbon-efficient path would entail significant financial investment. This presents a complex challenge for democratic governance across Africa, as nations must navigate the delicate balance between advancing climate action and achieving more general development goals. The political leadership and citizenry alike must collectively support the substantial upfront costs associated with mitigation and adaptation initiatives to secure long-term economic and environmental benefits. African leaders will need to see beyond election cycles in order to do this. The "State and Trends in Climate Adaptation Finance 2023" study, which was introduced at COP28, offers a thorough examination of the flows of climate money worldwide with an emphasis on Africa. Adaptation finance decreased from 7% to 5% of overall climate finance in 2021-2022, despite global climate finance tripling to US\$ 1.3 trillion yearly in that same period. Africa only got 20% of global adaptation financing flows, which is inadequate given that the continent is badly affected by climate change while having very low greenhouse gas emissions. The Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) for the region project a requirement of US\$ 53 billion per year between 2020 and 2035; however, this might be up to 100% underestimating real costs. Based on prevailing patterns, it appears that Africa will only raise US\$ 195 billion by 2035, a far cry from the projected US\$ 1.6 trillion required for adaptation. Furthermore, there is a worrying trend in the balance between investments in climate mitigation and adaptation, with adaptation financing falling to 36% of overall climate finance in 2021-2022 from 39% in 2019-2020 (Ede Ijjasz-Vasquez, 2024).

5. Building Climate Resilience in Sub-Saharan Africa: Strengthening National Initiatives through Regional and Global Collaboration

A wide range of tactics, such as adaptation, mitigation, technical advancement, and research, are required to handle climate change in Africa. In order to provide many kinds of aid, such monetary transfers, weather forecasts, early warning systems, and infrastructure planning, international collaboration is essential. Governments are putting adaptation measures like enhanced flood defenses and early warning agencies into place because they understand how important it is to be prepared for disasters. Substantial funding is still required, nevertheless, as meteorological data is essential but underfunded in sub-Saharan Africa. Global North development partners are crucial for supporting mitigation and adaptation plans because they provide financial and planning help that is adapted to the vulnerabilities unique to each nation. Funding for vulnerability assessments, systematic monitoring, capacity building, planning and execution of sector-specific adaptations, and awareness rising should all be part of this support. A crucial component of adaptation will be regional collaboration. Global warming surpasses national boundaries. The depletion of vital water bodies, such as Lake Chad and the Volta Basin, poses a significant threat to food security and hydroelectric power generation across multiple nations. In the case of Lake Chad, countries including Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger face severe repercussions, while the Volta Basin's dwindling resources impact Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Mali, and Togo, highlighting the far-reaching consequences of environmental degradation on regional steadiness and development. Accelerating adaptation can be achieved by the active exchange of information, technology, and efficient institutional processes, particularly through regional efforts (IMF, 2020).

6. Financing Adaptation in Sub-Saharan Africa

Sub-Saharan Africa will have to pay a hefty price for adaption efforts in response to climate change-roughly US\$30-50 billion year, or 2-3 percent of the region's GDP-during the next ten years, but far less than regular disaster aid (AFRICA, n.d.). The examination of Post-Disaster Needs Assessments in this chapter reveals that initial

investments in coping mechanisms and resilience yield long-term savings (calculated by lower spending on disaster relief) that are nearly three times greater than initial investments in drought relief and roughly twelve times greater than initial investments in storm relief. The results of Hallegatte and colleagues (2019) are comparable. An active public equilibrium model is employed to analyze the broader benefits associated with enhancing resilience, providing a comprehensive framework to assess its long-term economic and societal impacts. The findings show that, even in the case where resilience is not developed, public debt levels increase by less than 25%, and the post-disaster widening of inequality is significantly restrained. Resilient infrastructure is also 25% more expensive than conventional infrastructure. The cost of developing resilient infrastructure may be decreased by efficiency advantages in operations, management, and construction (Rozenberg and Fay 2019). Certain non-infrastructure adaption strategies might be put into place right now and are less expensive. Programs that help farmers buy better seeds and other crop-protection tools, for instance, and those that give early alerts for weather-related disasters, have comparatively high benefit-to-cost ratios (Hallegatte 2012; GCA 2019). The same is true for prompt and focused social support; according to Del Ninno, Coll-Black, and Fallavier (2016), Ethiopia spent a mere 1.2 percent of GDP yearly and produced amazing outcomes for households experiencing food poverty. Africa has not received enough support for adaptation, especially in light of the financial effects of climate change. In spite of this, little fresh or increased cash has been pledged by the international community. According to estimates from the UNDP and the World Bank, significant efforts are required to address global food shortages and protect existing investments in developing nations from the adverse impacts of climate change, additional contributions of roughly \$85 million by 2015 and \$10-40 billion annually, respectively, are required. A large amount of these contributions will go into public accounts. The global response to climate change adaptation has remained inadequate. Despite the establishment of international financial mechanisms like the Special Climate Change Fund and the Least Developed Countries Fund, only a fraction of the pledged financial support has been effectively disbursed. Out of the \$279 million that was originally committed, only around \$26 million has been transferred thus far, which is much less than anticipated. The

Adaptation Fund was created to support initiatives in poor nations under the Kyoto Protocol after the UNFCCC meeting in Bali in 2007. It authorized a \$500 million award for poor nations beginning in 2012, with funding provided by a 2% charge on Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) profits (Dinar, 2013). With this promise, funders will have concrete responsibilities and execution deadlines, going beyond mere platitudes. Numerous creative funding methods, including market-based approaches like disaster bonds and micro insurance, as well as carbon and aviation fees, have been put forth. However, beneficiaries' responsibility and their capacity for open and efficient money management are what will determine if adaption measures are successful. African nations must contend with issues such as a lack of resources, capacity constraints, and insufficient accountability and transparency frameworks.

7. Conclusion

India faces complex policy trade-offs in addressing climate change; however, a pathway exists to foster a more sustainable, resilient, and inclusive model of growth. One of India's main development objectives is to keep enhancing the level of living for more than one billion people. It must also play a significant role in lowering global GHG emissions because, in absolute terms, it is now among the biggest polluters. In order to encourage the production and use of renewable energy, the government has put in place a number of measures. These include PLI programs, RPOs, PAT, and, most recently, a carbon trading market. In order to achieve the 2070 net zero target, further work is required. With its huge reliance on the mineral for industrial activity and energy production, which results in large CO₂ emissions, the Indian government has a formidable challenge in moving away from coal. More than 20 million people rely on jobs connected to coal. India has responded to this by introducing a number of policy instruments, such as regulatory frameworks, tradable energy certificates, and subsidies for the use of renewable energy. While they have started the shift toward reduced emissions, these measures are not enough to slow the rate at which emissions are increasing. In order to achieve emission reduction targets and take advantage of local debt markets, it is imperative to increase investment in renewable energy, especially through technology transfer and foreign financing. Depending on the chosen policy path, India must weigh the costs and advantages of reaching

its net zero target. Although communities that depend on coal would probably suffer and short-term growth may be adversely affected by lowering greenhouse gas emissions, these costs can be offset by well-designed programs. Benefits include increased production and better health outcomes as a result of lower pollution. Supporting individuals most impacted by the shift through skill development and transfers must be given top priority in policy. Postponing the transition to a sustainable emissions route will result in higher expenses and less overall advantages. India has taken a number of steps to combat climate change, such as encouraging afforestation and renewable energy sources. Nevertheless, 55% of Indians do not have access to commercial energy. India contends that reducing greenhouse gas emissions comes with a high price tag and may impede GDP expansion by requiring a switch from less expensive fossil fuels to more costly non-carbon energy sources. Consequently, poor nations' fundamental development requirements and economic ambitions should not be compromised by attempts to address climate change.

Africa is the continent most vulnerable to climate variability because it lacks the capacity to deal with its economic consequences, even though it contributes very little to global emissions. Therefore, it's critical that Africans comprehend the politics around climate change and give mitigation and adaptation initiatives top priority. Research, technology advancement, adaptation, and mitigation should all be included in these efforts, with industrialized and developing nations pursuing adaptation and mitigation strategies concurrently. 'No-regrets' methods and incentive-based rules are necessary to ensure high-level involvement. All development initiatives should incorporate adaptation strategies without taking away from larger development goals, with a focus on co-benefit models that combine economic growth and environmental sustainability. The deliberate and comprehensive incorporation of climate change considerations into policymaking is essential at all levels of governance and across various sectors, both within national borders and in regional frameworks. African countries have to assess current budget allocations and environmental regulations, enhancing current partnerships and modernizing antiquated programs to satisfy adaption needs. The international community can help Africa by helping to reframe policies to successfully combat climate change.

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Ensuring No One is Left Behind: A Sociological Inquiry into the Intersectional Impediments to Dalit Women Accessing Higher Education in India

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Abstract

While the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) envision “leaving no one behind”, this study critically examines the realization of the 2030-agenda in terms of the Intersectional impediments to Dalit Women Accessing Higher Education in India. Drawing on lived experiences across multiple regions viz. studies from North, West, East and South India – this research highlights how caste, class and gender discrimination shapes the choice, course and completion of higher education by Dalit women. Despite the functionality of higher education in social mobility, several Dalit women face immanent barriers including overt biases, subtle violence, Financial barriers, early marriage and domestic responsibilities. Although government policies aim to improve access, implementation gaps persist limiting their reach. By locating socio-economic, cultural, institutional and patriarchal barriers encountered by Dalit women, Dasthagir, Archana and Kavitha argue that while aspirations have risen, the struggle for educational equity remains deeply entangled in intersectional impediments challenging India’s commitment to SDGs.

Keywords

Lived experiences of Dalit women, Access to higher education, Intersectionality, Dalit feminism, Sustainable Development Goals.

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1. Background

Higher education plays a critical role in shaping both individual lives and society at large. It is not merely an institution for acquiring academic knowledge but a powerful social mechanism that influences social mobility, cultural norms, and economic development. It serves as a means of socialization, preparing individuals to perform specific roles within society while transmitting societal values, norms, and essential skills. A well-educated population is widely regarded as a key factor in fostering social stability by creating a skilled workforce that supports economic and social systems (Khanal *et al.*, 2023).

In light of the significance of higher education for social development, the Sustainable Development Goals (2016-2030) present a comprehensive and ambitious vision for education. SDG 4: Quality Education extends beyond primary education, emphasizing the need for inclusive, equitable, and high-quality education at all levels, including higher education. This goal aims to ensure that all individuals have access to lifelong learning opportunities, thereby increasing access to tertiary education, which is directly linked to achieving other SDGs. Furthermore, higher education is explicitly recognized in the SDG framework for its role in fostering research, innovation, and capacity-building-essential components in addressing global challenges such as climate change, inequality, and public health crises. The SDGs also highlight the importance of international collaboration in higher education, promoting global partnerships to strengthen education systems and facilitate knowledge exchange across borders (Franco *et al.*, 2019).

However, higher education is also a site of social stratification and inequality, as access to it is often determined by socioeconomic status, thereby reinforcing existing social hierarchies. Individuals from economically privileged backgrounds are more likely to attend prestigious institutions, securing high-paying jobs, whereas those from marginalized communities face systemic barriers to higher education, limiting their opportunities for upward mobility.

Consequently, the education system perpetuates structural inequalities by legitimizing and reproducing disparities based on class, caste, gender, and ethnicity. Additionally, higher education shapes individual identities and social interactions. University experiences influence how individuals perceive themselves and engage with society. Academic credentials, such as “college graduate” or “doctoral degree holder,” carry significant social capital, shaping one’s societal status and recognition. Recognizing these disparities, SDG 4 places a strong emphasis on equity, advocating for increased access to higher education for marginalized and underrepresented groups, including women, persons with disabilities, and individuals from low-income and rural backgrounds (Thampi & Odathakkal, 2023).

Against this backdrop, this article critically examines the SDG agenda’s effectiveness in ensuring inclusive development by assessing the extent to which higher education opportunities are accessible to Dalit women in India. Drawing on empirical evidence from three studies conducted in North India (Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, and Bihar), one from West India, one from East India, and two from South India (Telangana and Tamil Nadu), this study highlights the compounded effects of caste-based discrimination, patriarchal constraints, and economic marginalization on Dalit women’s educational experiences.

2. Higher Education and Sustainable Development Goals

The Sustainable Development Goals and their associated targets constitute the global development framework introduced by the United Nations as the successor to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Adopted by 195 nations in 2015, the SDGs form the foundation of Agenda 2030, a comprehensive roadmap aimed at achieving sustainable development by 2030. Rooted in a people-centric approach, the SDGs emphasize accountability, transparency, and inclusivity, positioning them as a model for holistic societal progress.

While the MDGs primarily focused on basic education and universal access to primary schooling, the SDGs adopt a broader vision, particularly emphasizing the role of higher education in sustainable development (Franco *et al.*, 2019). The SDG framework

places significant emphasis on equity in higher education, advocating for greater access among marginalized populations, including women, persons with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged groups (Sachs, 2012).

By expanding access to higher education, particularly for historically excluded groups, the SDGs aim to reduce inequality (SDG 10) and enhance social mobility. Higher education serves as a mechanism for breaking socio-economic barriers, fostering workforce participation, governance inclusion, and decision-making agency. However, despite the transformative potential of this global agenda, concerns persist regarding its effectiveness in addressing the needs of structurally marginalized populations, raising critical questions about its equitable impact across diverse social strata (Pandey, 2023).

3. Relevance of Higher Education for Gender Development

Higher education plays a transformative role in challenging traditional social structures and empowering women, particularly those from marginalized communities. It provides specialized skills, fosters economic independence, and contributes to societal development. As more women enter higher education, gender stereotypes weaken, promoting greater gender equality across various sectors and enhancing the collective social fabric.

However, structural inequalities-including caste, class, and gender disparities-continue to shape women's access to higher education. Despite legal and social advancements, women from lower castes, rural regions, and economically disadvantaged backgrounds face significant barriers to educational attainment. These inequalities reinforce existing social hierarchies, restricting many women from pursuing higher education and accessing better economic opportunities, thereby perpetuating patriarchal and caste-based discrimination (Deshpande, 2013).

Beyond its economic benefits, higher education reshapes women's identities, enabling them to redefine their roles within the family and society. Educated women are more likely to challenge societal norms, drive social change within their communities, and promote values of equality, self-reliance, and empowerment.

4. Significance of Higher education for Dalit women

Feminist sociologist Gail Omvedt has described Indian Dalit women as the “Dalit among Dalits”, emphasizing their multifaceted discrimination within Indian society. Historically marginalized, Dalit women experience triple oppression-based on gender, caste, and patriarchal structures, including those within their own communities.

The term “Dalit” refers to those positioned at the lowest strata of the caste hierarchy, historically subjected to social exclusion, systemic oppression, and discrimination. Dalit women, however, face an intensified form of subjugation due to the intersectionality of caste, gender, and class inequalities. Their experiences have been conceptualized as “double oppression” (ADRF, 2013), highlighting their unique vulnerabilities in both caste-based and gendered social structures.

5. Theoretical Framework

According to intersectionality theory, developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, individuals belonging to multiple marginalized groups experience overlapping and compounded forms of discrimination. Dalit women, as members of both the lowest caste and a patriarchal society, are subjected to caste-based oppression, gender subjugation, and economic marginalization. They face exploitation in various forms, including lower wages, restricted access to education, and limited mobility. In rural India, Dalit women are frequently forced into manual labor, particularly in occupations deemed “impure”, such as sanitation work, which perpetuates their socio-economic subjugation.

Due to these intersecting oppressions, Dalit women are socially stigmatized and dehumanized in everyday interactions, reinforcing their systemic exclusion. The caste system, with its rigid hierarchical structure, maintains social order at the cost of institutionalizing inequality for Dalit women. An intersectional analysis highlights how Dalit women experience dual marginalization-both as women and as members of a lower caste-resulting in persistent discrimination, violence, and social injustice (Pan, 2021). Their struggle is not only against patriarchal oppression but also against deep-rooted caste-based discrimination, which continues to shape their social and economic realities. Dalit feminism, as a distinct standpoint, critically

examines the intersections of caste, class, and gender domination (Dasthagir, 2016). It does not merely trace what divides women and what connects them but instead conceptualizes a collective subject position rooted in the lived experiences of Dalit women. Drawing from the anti-caste ideologies of Phule and Ambedkar, Dalit feminism rejects homogenized understandings of patriarchal oppression and challenges mainstream feminist discourse for failing to account for caste-based inequalities (Rege, 2000).

6. Educational Status of Dalit Women in India

Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4) emphasizes inclusive and equitable education and promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all. However, despite policy initiatives, deep-rooted disparities persist in India's education system, particularly among marginalized communities. The national literacy rate stands at 73%, yet Dalits have a significantly lower literacy rate of 66.1%. Within Dalit communities, gender disparities are even more pronounced, with Scheduled Caste (SC) girls exhibiting the lowest literacy rate at 24.4%, compared to the national female literacy rate of 42.8%. In particularly marginalized groups, such as the Mushahar community, female literacy is alarmingly low at just 9%.

Table-1: Gender Literacy Rates (All India, Scheduled Castes)

Category	Gender Literacy Rates			Gender Gap
	Male	Female	Total	
1. India	80.9	64.6	73	16.3
2. Scheduled Castes	75.2	56.5	66.1	18.7
3. SCs gap from India literacy rate	5.7	8.1	6.9	-

Source: Census of India 2011

Further illustrating educational deprivation, the mean years of schooling for Dalits is a mere 3.2 years, significantly lower than the national average. A key factor driving the high dropout rates among Dalit children-particularly in primary education-is caste-based discrimination. This social exclusion, compounded by poverty, malnutrition, and inadequate early childhood care, results in disproportionate dropout rates. Data indicate that 22.8% of Dalit children aged 6-17 are out of school, with 50% of Dalit children and 64% of Dalit girls dropping out due to caste-based discrimination.

Discriminatory practices persist in schools, with 37.8% of village schools still forcing Dalit children to sit separately, reinforcing social segregation. The dropout rate for Dalit children (ages 5-15) remains at 68.48%, a figure that has shown little improvement over the past decade. Despite government interventions, such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), exclusionary practices continue to marginalize Dalit students. These include teacher bias, segregated seating arrangements, neglect in classroom interactions, and derogatory remarks regarding their intellectual abilities, which are often attributed to caste-based prejudices. Additionally, peer exclusion and systemic neglect—such as the lack of caste-sensitization training for educators and the non-implementation of government schemes intended to support Dalit children—further perpetuate these inequalities.

The educational challenges faced by Dalit children are not merely institutional failures but also reflections of structural caste-based inequities that persist in Indian society. These barriers not only hinder Dalit children's access to quality education but also entrench the cycle of caste-based discrimination and social exclusion. Addressing these issues requires more than policy interventions—it necessitates comprehensive and inclusive educational reforms that actively dismantle both caste-based and gender-based disparities, ensuring meaningful educational access for historically marginalized communities.

7. Why Higher Education for Dalit Women?

The enrollment of Dalit women in higher education carries far-reaching implications, not only for their personal empowerment but also for broader societal transformation. Higher education serves as a critical mechanism for social mobility, offering Dalit women an opportunity to break the cycle of poverty and marginalization. By acquiring formal education and specialized skills, Dalit women gain access to higher-paying jobs, economic independence, and enhanced participation in the formal workforce, thereby challenging entrenched caste and gender hierarchies.

Moreover, higher education functions as a site of resistance against traditional caste and gender norms. Drawing from Bourdieu's (1998) theory of cultural reproduction, education plays a fundamental role in the transmission and contestation of social norms and values. For Dalit women, the pursuit of higher education

disrupts hegemonic structures, allowing them to challenge caste-based discrimination and patriarchal constraints. Educated Dalit women are more likely to become active agents of change, advocating for gender equality, social justice, and the upliftment of marginalized communities.

Beyond individual empowerment, higher education facilitates greater participation of Dalit women in the public sphere. It enables them to engage in political activism, policy advocacy, and leadership roles, contributing to the formulation of policies that address the systemic exclusion of Dalit communities. In this sense, the education of Dalit women serves as a powerful form of resistance against both caste- and gender-based oppression, fostering a more inclusive and equitable society..

8. Lived Experiences of Dalit Women accessing Higher Education in India

The enrolment of Dalit women in higher education in India is a complex issue shaped by multiple social, cultural, and economic factors. Their struggle for access to education, particularly higher education, reflects the intersection of caste-based oppression and patriarchal gender norms. The enrolment of Dalit women in higher education must be understood within the broader framework of social stratification, inequality, and the dynamics of power, privilege, and resistance. A qualitative and descriptive analysis of the challenges faced by Dalit women in Uttar Pradesh in pursuing higher education reveals several socio-economic, cultural, and systemic obstacles that hinder their educational advancement. One significant finding is the critical role of financial resources-women from financially stable families are more likely to pursue higher education. Furthermore, strong family support plays a crucial role in encouraging Dalit women to continue their studies, whereas marriage often emerges as a major barrier to further education after secondary school. While government reservation policies have been instrumental in facilitating access to higher education for Dalit women, a lack of awareness about these policies among many families contributes to the persistent educational gap. Safety and security remain critical concerns, particularly in rural areas, where the proximity of educational institutions and access to transportation significantly influence their ability to attend college. Awareness of government schemes and technological advancements, such as

internet access, has also played a positive role in supporting their educational journeys.

Examining the role of family in shaping Dalit women's educational decisions, many respondents asserted that family approval was crucial in their pursuit of higher education. Some noted that concerns about safety and the perceived value of higher education often led to family reluctance in supporting further academic ambitions. Another notable concern is the increasing privatization of jobs, which, while presenting new opportunities, also perpetuates caste-based discrimination in hiring practices. Social media networks have emerged as a source of support, helping Dalit women feel safer and more empowered. However, the fear of digital judgment and online harassment continues to discourage some from fully engaging with higher education and employment. These findings highlight the multifaceted barriers faced by Dalit women, including socio-economic constraints, family dynamics, systemic discrimination, and societal perceptions, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions to support their educational and professional aspirations (Rani, 2023).

Further exploration of the socio-economic and cultural conditions of households engaged in so-called "unclean" occupations reveals the discriminatory practices Dalits face within the education system. A study on Dalit girls' education among scavenging communities in urban Haryana underscores the intersectionality of caste and gender in shaping their educational experiences. The term "unclean" occupations does not refer to hygiene but to religiously prescribed occupations considered impure, such as scavenging, which involves physical contact with bodily defilements. Research focusing on urban areas of Haryana, specifically Panipat and Faridabad, highlights the complex challenges Dalit girls from these households encounter.

Dalit girls face not only caste-based discrimination, such as being labeled with derogatory terms like "Bhangi" or "Chura", but also gender-based marginalization within their communities and schools. Despite increased access to education, they continue to face stigmatization, are often segregated from subjects like computers, and may even be excluded from activities such as mid-day meals. Additionally, they are more likely to endure physical punishment and be assigned degrading tasks like cleaning classrooms. These discriminatory practices persist despite policy efforts aimed at

inclusion, and they reinforce the structural exclusion of Dalit girls from meaningful educational opportunities.

Cultural and familial barriers further limit Dalit girls' education, with early marriage and a lack of prioritization of girls' education emerging as significant obstacles. Families frequently allocate better educational resources to boys, often sending them to private schools with additional tuition support, while girls are more likely to attend under-resourced government schools. This gendered differentiation in educational opportunities contributes to a broader gender gap in education quality. Household responsibilities, including caring for siblings and performing domestic chores, further restrict girls' ability to attend school regularly and succeed academically. The socio-economic barriers in Dalit girls' education cannot be understood in isolation from the intertwined systems of caste and patriarchy. The Dalit feminist standpoint recognizes this intersectionality, urging educational policies and practices to empower Dalit girls to challenge their marginalized position in both the education system and society at large. In response to these inequalities, the Government of India has introduced several initiatives, including the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, and the National Scheme for Incentives to Girls for Secondary Education, specifically aimed at improving Dalit girls' enrolment rates. As a result of these initiatives, the enrolment rate of Scheduled Caste (SC) girls has increased significantly, rising from 20.86% in 1961 to 56.50% in 2011 (Census, 2011). Moreover, in recent years, there has been a notable rise in the number of Dalit girls enrolling in the Indian education system, with more girls than boys participating in some areas.

Drawing from primary and secondary sources of data, a comparative study conducted in two blocks of Patna district in Bihar on educational mobility among Dalit women examines the socio-economic dynamics shaping their educational aspirations. The study reveals that Dalit women's future aspirations have undergone a significant transformation. Due to various government educational programs and policies, more Dalit women now prefer sending their children outside their villages for higher education. This shift in mindset is likely to have a lasting impact on the educational participation of Dalit women in Bihar, gradually altering traditional power relationships within Dalit families. A significant proportion of

Dalit women have high aspirations for their children's education, reflecting a notable shift in educational ambitions. This change signals a growing desire for higher and diversified forms of education among Dalit families, driven by evolving socio-economic conditions and the influence of governmental initiatives. The educational status of a family serves as a key indicator of economic conditions within Dalit households. Despite the availability of free education, some families, particularly those with low economic status, prioritize sending their children to work rather than school. However, the aspirations of Dalit women have evolved significantly, with an increasing preference for sending their children outside their villages for higher education. Many Dalit women aspire to educate their children at least up to the undergraduate level, while some aim for postgraduate or technical degrees. There is also a growing inclination towards private schooling, particularly for daughters, reflecting a heightened valuation of quality education.

The job aspirations that Dalit women hold for their children reveal a gendered pattern in career preferences. While professions such as teaching are favored for daughters, more demanding careers, such as engineering or advocacy, are desired for sons. Despite these gendered expectations, many Dalit women demonstrate a strong willingness to invest in their children's education, indicating a shift in values towards academic and professional success. The condition of educated women is relatively better in developed villages, whereas in underdeveloped areas, it remains constrained by unemployment, patriarchal norms, and limited socio-economic progress. Female education continues to face significant barriers, particularly due to economic hardship, safety concerns, and male dominance, which are primary reasons for restricting girls from pursuing education outside their villages. These challenges are more pronounced in underdeveloped regions.

Furthermore, the freedom of Dalit women to access education remains limited in comparison to upper-caste women. While some Dalit women believe they have similar educational freedoms, early marriage, economic constraints, and lack of family support continue to create disparities. Despite some progress, Dalit women still face significant barriers to achieving educational equality. Socio-economic marginalization, restricted access to education, concerns regarding female safety, and patriarchal control continue to limit the mobility of Dalit girls, particularly in rural areas. These socio-cultural

barriers are more pronounced in underdeveloped regions than in relatively developed ones (Kumar, 2023).

Exploring the experiences of Dalit women in higher education, the study *Navigating Challenges: A Sociological Study of Dalit Women's Experiences in Higher Education in Odisha* employed a qualitative research design to examine the challenges faced by Dalit women in higher education institutions. The findings highlight a shared sense of marginalization among Dalit women students, both within the classroom and the broader educational system. A consistent pattern of invisibility and lack of attention from both teachers and peers was observed. Many Dalit women students are reluctant to engage in classroom activities, often attributing their silence to the lack of support and encouragement from educators. Some students reported feeling inadequate and anxious when attempting to participate, reflecting a broader sense of exclusion from academic interactions. Certain Dalit women expressed concerns about being sidelined by teachers who demonstrated preferential treatment toward upper-caste students, leading to diminished confidence and disengagement.

The students' experiences also underscore the intersectionality of caste and gender in shaping their educational journeys. Some Dalit girls reported feeling isolated due to their caste background and language barriers, contributing to self-doubt in academic settings. Many Dalit women students have experienced ridicule for their English proficiency, illustrating the intersection of caste, gender, and academic performance. Derogatory remarks from classmates have been shown to diminish their self-worth, reinforcing subtle and often unspoken forms of discrimination. These manifestations of invisible caste bias continue to shape their educational trajectories. Many Dalit women also described the fear of revealing their caste identity, worried that it might affect their social relationships and academic opportunities. These accounts emphasize the persistent and pervasive nature of caste-based discrimination in educational institutions.

There are two main types of bias, viz. :

- ▶ Discrimination based on caste, ethnicity and socio-economic status
- ▶ Favouritism based on personal biases or physical appearance

The latter aspect of discrimination manifests in teachers' preferential treatment of students deemed more attractive, further

perpetuating inequality within the classroom. These forms of bias contribute to an unhealthy learning environment, hindering Dalit women's academic engagement and success. Thus, greater recognition, institutional support, and equitable treatment of Dalit women in educational institutions are essential to fostering their full academic potential and participation (Suna, 2024).

A study examining the high dropout rates among Dalit women in collegiate education in Palakurty Mandal, Warangal, Andhra Pradesh-Dalit Women and Dropout Rates in Collegiate Education: A Study of the Warangal District-reveals that despite progress in literacy, dropout rates remain high among Dalit girls, particularly in rural areas. Several socio-cultural, economic, and infrastructural factors contribute to this trend. Caste discrimination, often manifested through spatial segregation, limits Dalit students' social interactions and networks, exacerbating their educational challenges. Child marriage is another significant factor, as many Dalit girls are forced to discontinue their studies at an early stage, with some marrying as early as the 7th or 8th standard. One respondent in the study was forced to drop out while pursuing an undergraduate degree due to being visually impaired and having to travel long distances to college. The intersectionality of caste, gender, and disability further marginalizes Dalit girls, making access to higher education even more challenging and increasing the likelihood of dropping out.

Gender bias within Dalit families compounds the problem, as girls are often expected to handle household and agricultural responsibilities. The absence of industries in the Mandal results in most rural residents working as agricultural laborers, earning meager daily wages. As agriculture is a seasonal occupation, employment is irregular and impermanent, prompting many families to migrate to nearby cities in search of work. This migration disrupts the educational continuity of Dalit children. Furthermore, many Dalit parents, particularly in rural areas, are illiterate and unaware of the importance of higher education, leading to a lack of motivation and guidance for their children.

Economic constraints play a central role in dropout rates. Many Dalit families rely on agricultural labor, earning an annual income of less than ₹20,000, making it difficult to support their children's education. Additionally, students face transportation challenges, as there are no government colleges within the Mandal, requiring them

to travel to distant private institutions. These colleges often lack basic facilities such as libraries, laboratories, and adequate toilet facilities, while transport costs remain unaffordable for many. The lack of female teachers also affects Dalit girls' comfort and ability to form supportive relationships with educators. Other academic challenges, such as difficulties in understanding English, mathematics, and physical sciences, further contribute to dropout rates.

The study also highlights students' attitudes toward caste and course selection. Upper-caste female students expressed pride in selecting science courses, associating their choice with their caste background. In contrast, a significant proportion of Dalit students opted for liberal arts courses, reflecting disparities in academic confidence and access to resources. The findings underscore the need for improved access to quality education and institutional infrastructure, including hostels, healthcare, and a secure college environment. The absence of awareness and parental guidance, coupled with inadequate state support, often leads Dalit students to enroll in expensive and unsuitable courses. The study argues that addressing socio-cultural, economic, and infrastructural deficiencies—such as improving transportation, creating safe learning environments, and raising awareness—can help reduce dropout rates and improve educational outcomes for Dalit girls. Additionally, the study found that female illiteracy rates remain disproportionately high. The discontinuation of Akshara Deepika, a government literacy program that provided evening education in rural areas with the assistance of Vidya volunteers, has had a negative impact on literacy rates (Harinath, 2013).

Exploring the complexities surrounding access to higher education, focusing on the role of social factors such as caste, socio-economic background, schooling, parental involvement and social networks, the case study on the "Access of Dalit Women to higher education in Tamil Nadu", highlights the barriers and facilitators that shape opportunities for educational attainment. The filtering process in higher education, driven by the need for specialized skills, often excludes individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, who face inequalities in both material and non-material resources. These disparities, compounded by social prejudices based on caste, race, and gender intersectionality result in unequal access to higher education.

Although the reservation policy, which allocates a certain percentage of seats to Dalit students, is an attempt to address these inequalities, its effectiveness is limited by the lack of adequate preparatory resources and social support for Dalit students, which hampers their transition into higher education. Large number of Dalit women are first-generation college-goers, primarily because their parents have no prior college experience, lead to a range of challenges including lower academic preparation, lack of parental support and limited financial resources.

Thus there exists disparity in the enrolment of Dalit women in higher education in Tamil Nadu, Correspondingly, although there is a significant increase in the number of higher education institutions and enrolment in the state, the proportion of enrolment of Dalit women students continue to remain low manifesting the persistence of structural inequalities within the education system of Tamil Nadu. Further, the disproportionate enrolment of Dalit girls into higher education is found to be more pronounced in rural areas than urban. This reflects the intersection of caste, gender, and geography in shaping educational opportunities. The dominance of private unaided institutions in Tamil Nadu exacerbates these inequalities, as they often cater to those who can afford higher fees, limiting access for Dalit women who not only belong to lower caste but also belong to low class families. Additionally, the gendered character of choice of course with men dominating engineering and women in medicine reflects societal gender stereotypes.

There is a correlation between the age of the respondents and the family's ability to afford expenses, in which as the age of the respondents increases, the parents spending on daughters' education tends to decrease.

Moreover, the limited availability of the Government colleges poses constraint for the disadvantaged students to get enrolled.

There seem to be higher level of parent involvement for the First-generation college students, particularly in undergraduate programs, in contrasts to graduate parents. Additionally, family financial support is more readily available for students in professional courses and post-graduate programs. In this regard, the government colleges are more accessible to students from lower-income backgrounds due to lower fees than the private colleges for Dalit women pursuing higher education in Tamil Nadu.

Awareness of government schemes and programs is another factor influencing access to higher education. Students with family members who have attended college are more likely to be aware of and utilize these schemes. Furthermore, gender and family structure influence access, with girls benefiting from better educational support when mothers are more educated. It highlights the importance of sustained parental involvement and social networks in overcoming barriers to higher education, with regard to Dalit women in higher education (Sumithra & Aruna, 2016).

Focusing on Dalit women's personal experiences and their perceptions of social mobility, the study *Refashioning Futures: Dalit Women's Education and Empowerment in Maharashtra* explores the diversity within Dalit communities, particularly differences between the Mahars and Matangs. Despite the deeply entrenched caste-based segregation in Pune—historically shaped by Brahmanical dominance—Matang women have made significant strides in education and career development.

Although global narratives portray India as having an improved educational system with increased enrollment rates, scholars argue that there remains a significant gap in securing employment for Dalit youth. Unemployment, poverty, and economic distress continue to hinder parents' ability to support their children's education. Some respondents in the study reported that municipal schools in vernacular Marathi medium had extremely poor physical infrastructure. Classrooms were dark, lacked hygiene, and were surrounded by insects and pests. School buildings had leaking roofs, no toilets, mud floors, and an inadequate number of teachers. The bleak and unsanitary school environment caused many students to lose interest in learning, even among those who initially performed well academically. Many students also expressed feelings of being overburdened. Beyond the school environment, a conducive home setting is also essential for nurturing academic interest. The study found a generational gap in educational attainment, with first-generation Dalit students facing greater obstacles than those whose parents had prior schooling experience. The study also notes that decent manners, dignified behavior, and strict discipline were perceived as critical to the success of Dalit students in education and employment. Parents of Dalit children sought to challenge caste-based stereotypes by presenting their children as "well-behaved" and

“cultured”, demonstrating that they came from respectable households.

Participation in extracurricular activities, such as sports, was rarely available for first-generation Dalit students. However, second-generation Dalit students who attended elite English-medium schools had greater access to such opportunities. In contrast to findings from Odisha and Warangal, where Dalit students faced limited extracurricular participation, parents in Maharashtra encouraged their children to engage in activities such as music, dance, drawing, and crafts. The study also notes that some Dalit students engaged in Sanskritization to counter caste-based prejudices, while others felt psychologically burdened to prove their competency for certain jobs.

A notable gender disparity in educational access emerged within Dalit families. Many parents sent their daughters to Marathi-medium schools while enrolling their sons in English-medium convent schools, reflecting a continuation of gendered educational hierarchies. Teachers’ biases toward upper-caste students further marginalized Dalit women, reinforcing institutionalized inequality. Even when Dalit women performed well academically, they often faced exclusion and a lack of recognition, exemplifying the intersection of caste-based discrimination and gendered oppression. However, Dalit women in higher education actively sought to challenge these barriers, using education as a tool for resilience and social mobility. This scenario underscores the intersection of cultural capital (academic success) and caste-based marginalization, highlighting the ways in which caste influences social interactions and educational outcomes.

The study also sheds light on changing gender norms within Dalit families. Many fathers actively supported their daughters’ education, resisting traditional gender roles that might otherwise limit their daughters’ academic pursuits. In some cases, fathers played a crucial role in breaking stereotypes, ensuring that household chores did not interfere with their daughters’ studies. The analysis reveals that education among Dalits, particularly Dalit women, has undergone significant transformations over time, with increased aspirations despite historical resource limitations.

However, the study also critiques the contradictions within Dalit women’s educational and social experiences. While formal education

offers economic and social mobility, it also reinforces certain gendered expectations and societal norms that restrict women's autonomy. Dalit women who have achieved success in education and employment continue to face caste-based discrimination, and their agency remains constrained by new forms of middle-class Dalit patriarchy. Although this emerging middle class is relatively progressive, it often enforces traditional gender roles, limiting women's independence.

Despite these challenges, Dalit women exhibit resilience, challenging dominant caste norms and carving out new spaces for themselves in education and employment. Their experiences reflect a dual process of resistance and conformity, as they navigate both social transformation and continuity. While individual Dalit women have achieved significant progress, structural barriers continue to impede collective empowerment. The struggle for justice and equal opportunities remains ongoing, with Dalit women playing a pivotal role in reshaping their lives and communities.

The study situates Dalit women's experiences within the broader context of Dalit emancipation, drawing on the contributions of social reformers like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Jyotirao Phule, who critiqued caste and gender hierarchies while championing Dalit education. Despite these historical efforts, Dalit women continue to face exclusion and marginalization in education, encountering persistent challenges that hinder their progress in higher education (Paik, 2019).

9. Intersectional Impediments to Dalit Women in accessing Higher Education

Despite the constitutional guarantees of equality and non-discrimination enshrined in the Indian Constitution (Articles 15 and 17), Dalit women continue to face significant barriers in accessing higher education. These barriers exist across socioeconomic, structural, cultural, institutional, political, and patriarchal dimensions, limiting their academic and professional advancement.

9.1 Caste-based Discrimination

Caste remains one of the most persistent forms of discrimination in India, and Dalit women, positioned at the intersection of caste and gender hierarchies, face systemic exclusion in educational settings. Even when admitted to institutions of higher learning, they

frequently experience discrimination from both peers and teachers. This discrimination manifests in both overt and subtle ways-ranging from derogatory remarks, social exclusion, and violence to implicit biases in assessment and lower academic expectations. While affirmative action policies, such as reservations for Scheduled Castes (SC), aim to promote inclusivity, they do not fully mitigate the lived experiences of exclusion that Dalit women face. Discrimination extends beyond educational institutions into broader societal contexts, reinforcing systemic barriers to educational achievement.

9.2 Patriarchal Enclave

In addition to caste-based discrimination, Dalit women face deeply entrenched patriarchal norms that restrict their access to education. In many rural communities, higher education for women is still viewed as a challenge to traditional gender roles. Dalit women are often expected to prioritize domestic responsibilities and caregiving over academic aspirations. Families frequently invest more in the education of male children, reinforcing gender disparities. Early marriage and family labor obligations further hinder Dalit women's educational progress. Societal expectations push them into domestic roles at a young age, reducing the likelihood of completing higher education. Safety concerns also play a crucial role-many Dalit women face risks of gender and caste-based violence while commuting to educational institutions, particularly in rural areas where public transportation is inadequate and personal safety remains a significant concern (Dasthagir, 2021).

9.3 Economic Barriers

Economic hardship is a key factor limiting Dalit women's participation in higher education. Many Dalit families live below the poverty line, making it difficult to afford tuition, textbooks, accommodation, and other educational expenses. Although government scholarships and financial aid programs exist, they often fail to cover the full cost of education. Moreover, bureaucratic hurdles and delays in disbursing scholarships further complicate access to these resources. Additionally, the need for young Dalit women to contribute to household incomes through labor often takes precedence over their education. Given the financial constraints within Dalit households, families frequently prioritize the education of sons over daughters, further exacerbating the gendered educational divide.

9.4 Inaccessible Institutions

Many Dalit women reside in rural and remote areas where higher education institutions are scarce. Even when institutions exist, long travel distances and high transportation costs pose significant challenges. The lack of adequate infrastructure-such as safe and affordable student hostels-further restricts their access to education. The digital divide also exacerbates educational inequality. Limited access to technology, including computers and internet connectivity, disproportionately affects Dalit women, particularly in rural areas. The shift toward digital and online learning in recent years has further marginalized those who lack technological resources.

9.5 Policies and Politics

The Indian government has implemented several policies aimed at increasing educational access for Dalit women. The Reservation Policy mandates a certain percentage of seats in educational institutions for Scheduled Castes (SC), including Dalit women, while scholarship programs such as the Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Post-Matric Scholarship provide financial assistance for higher education. Other initiatives, such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (Save the Girl Child, Educate the Girl Child), seek to promote female education, including among Dalit communities (Dasthagir, 2020). While these policies have contributed to increased enrolment, their implementation remains inconsistent. Many eligible Dalit students struggle to access the benefits due to bureaucratic inefficiencies and lack of awareness. Moreover, these policies often benefit a small section of Dalits, primarily those with better socio-economic backgrounds, while the vast majority remain excluded from higher education opportunities.

10. Conclusion

The enrolment of Dalit women in higher education in India remains a critical issue, highlighting the intersection of caste and gender discrimination. While government policies and initiatives have contributed to increased enrolment, Dalit women continue to face significant barriers, including caste-based exclusion, patriarchal norms, economic constraints, and limited access to educational institutions. Higher education serves as both a means of empowerment and a tool for challenging entrenched social structures that perpetuate inequality. Thus, ensuring greater access to higher education for Dalit women is not only a matter of social

justice but also a necessary step toward fostering a more equitable and inclusive society.

Against this backdrop, this study has examined the significance of higher education in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for Dalit women while also elucidating the intersectional impediments they face in pursuing education. Drawing on lived experiences from seven Indian states-Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, Telangana, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, and Haryana-this study provides empirical insights into the systemic barriers that continue to marginalize Dalit women within educational spaces.

The findings reveal that the educational experiences of Dalit women are shaped by the profound intersectionality of caste, gender, socio-economic status, and systemic discrimination. Studies conducted across various regions of India illustrate how these barriers are reinforced by deeply ingrained patriarchal structures, which hinder their educational aspirations. A recurring theme across these studies is the persistent marginalization of Dalit women within academic spaces, where many students report a sense of invisibility and exclusion. For instance, in Odisha, Dalit women noted the subtle yet pervasive caste biases that shape their interactions with educators and classmates. These biases, often unspoken, result in a lack of encouragement and support, discouraging their participation in academic activities. The fear of caste-based discrimination remains a significant concern, leading many Dalit women to conceal their caste identity to avoid prejudice.

The socio-economic constraints influencing Dalit women's access to higher education are also crucial. In Uttar Pradesh, financial stability emerges as a major determinant of whether Dalit women can continue education beyond secondary school. Family support is equally critical, yet many families remain reluctant to send their daughters to college, citing safety concerns or prioritizing marriage over education. In rural areas, the lack of accessible colleges and inadequate transportation further restricts opportunities for Dalit women. Similarly, in Andhra Pradesh, high dropout rates among Dalit girls in collegiate education are attributed to economic hardships, child marriage, and household responsibilities. These structural barriers limit their ability to pursue and complete higher education.

In Bihar, a shift in aspirations is evident, as Dalit women increasingly seek higher education for their children, recognizing its

transformative role in breaking cycles of caste-based oppression. However, this progress remains hindered by economic hardships, limited familial guidance, and entrenched gender expectations. Despite these barriers, there is a growing emphasis on educational success, with Dalit women aspiring to professional careers and greater autonomy. In Tamil Nadu, affirmative action policies—particularly the reservation policy for Scheduled Castes (SC)—have facilitated educational access. However, the effectiveness of these policies remains limited due to inadequate preparatory support and lack of awareness. While reservations provide formal opportunities, they do not address disparities in academic preparation and socio-economic constraints that Dalit students face. The filtering process in higher education, which prioritizes specialized skills, continues to marginalize students from disadvantaged backgrounds, further excluding Dalit women from professional and technical fields.

The broader socio-cultural landscape also plays a significant role in shaping the educational experiences of Dalit women. In Maharashtra, historical caste hierarchies continue to affect the educational and professional trajectories of Dalit women. While many have made notable strides in education and employment, they continue to navigate the contradictions of caste and patriarchy. Despite gaining greater access to education, socio-cultural expectations enforce traditional gender roles, limiting their autonomy and career aspirations.

Across these studies, the intersectionality of caste, gender, and socio-economic status remains a defining factor in Dalit women's educational experiences. Although progress has been made in terms of educational access, significant barriers persist, including systemic discrimination, lack of family support, financial constraints, and societal perceptions of gender roles.

Addressing these challenges requires targeted interventions that go beyond simply increasing enrolment. There is a need to:

- ▶ Strengthen anti-caste discrimination measures in educational institutions.
- ▶ Improve educational infrastructure, particularly in rural areas.
- ▶ Ensure better implementation of government policies and scholarship programs.
- ▶ Provide social and emotional support systems for Dalit women in academic spaces.

The ongoing struggles for justice and empowerment highlight the resilience of Dalit women, who continue to challenge societal norms and reshape their futures despite formidable obstacles. To achieve true educational equity, efforts must extend beyond policy and focus on structural and cultural transformations that allow Dalit women to fully participate and succeed in higher education.

11. Future Agenda and Suggestions

- ▶ Target 4.3: By 2030, ensure inclusive and equitable access to affordable, high-quality technical, vocational, and tertiary education, including university-level education, for all individuals, irrespective of gender (UNESCO, 2023).
- ▶ Achieving this target requires dismantling persistent barriers related to gender, socio-economic status, and geographic location. Educational systems often reflect and reinforce societal inequalities, resulting in the under-representation of women in higher education and vocational training, particularly in male-dominated fields. Addressing these disparities demands strategic investments in infrastructure, scholarship programs, and policies that promote inclusive and supportive learning environments.
- ▶ Ensuring equitable access is not limited to expanding opportunities but also enhancing the quality of education. In the context of global trends, such as the rise of the digital economy and the urgency of sustainable development, tackling educational inequalities is essential for fostering a more inclusive and equitable society. Although the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasize higher education as a cornerstone for sustainable development, access for Dalit women remains a critical factor for successfully achieving these objectives in India.
- ▶ To advance the 2030 agenda for Dalit women, the following recommendations are proposed:
 - **Proactive Policy Implementation:** Government authorities must implement policies to reduce dropout rates, particularly in marginalized and rural areas, through targeted interventions and inclusive educational frameworks.
 - **Infrastructure Development:** As recommended by the National Education Policy (2020), each administrative block

should have at least one government-run Junior and Degree College. Additionally, establishing a minimum of two residential colleges for girls at the intermediate level and one at the degree level per block is essential to provide safe, accessible, and conducive learning environments.

- **Educational Motivation and Support:** Educators should actively encourage students to pursue higher education by offering guidance, mentorship, and resources to overcome academic challenges and access learning opportunities.
- **Stakeholder Collaboration:** Achieving higher enrollment and retention rates requires coordinated efforts from all stakeholders, including students, parents, educators, policymakers, and elected representatives. A collective, community-driven approach is essential for addressing disparities, improving retention, and fostering socio-economic advancement.

This approach highlights the need for an integrated, community-oriented educational model that supports learners academically, socially, and culturally, ensuring sustainable progress toward achieving the SDGs.

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Fate vs Free Will in Sophocles' Oedipus & Antigone

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Abstract

Man is born free or so it is said, but is he free? Fate is the idea that whatever happens in this universe is predetermined by some higher natural powers over which man has no control whatsoever. These powers could be religious, psychological, ethical, or metaphysical in nature. There have been endless debates and discussions about the clash between man's free will and his fate. If destiny has its own ways of shaping a person's life, then how can man be said to have free will? And if he has free will, then how can everything be destined? Is fate fair or unfair, knowable, or unknowable? If everything in life is predestined, then why do some people suffer more than others? What is the point of learning or striving for anything? Why should people be judged or rewarded for their actions? Does pre-knowledge lead to despair or is it empowering? Should it lead a man to surrender to his destiny? Should he not give up on his life's purpose? In this paper, I propose to explore the ongoing tensions between human agency and divine providence with a special focus on Oedipus Rex, and Antigone, the plays written by Sophocles.

Keywords

Fate, Free will, Compatibilism.

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13

Fate vs Free Will in Sophocles' Oedipus & Antigone

1. Introduction

Fate, by definition, is a concept that is suggestive of an idea that is somewhat mysterious and unexplainable and which has strange power to control and determine our lives without our knowledge. It is daunting to find oneself in the grip of a predicament wherein a person feels powerless. Free will, on the other hand, is when a person is able to exercise control over his actions and is morally responsible for its rightness or wrongness. The onus of it being good or evil, vicious or virtuous, praiseworthy or blameworthy then rests on the individual concerned.

The question of fate and free will has been differently tackled by different philosophical schools since ancient times. In their essay, "Free Will", *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, Timothy O'Connor, and Christopher Franklin, write, that for Plato, "freedom is a kind of self-mastery, attained by developing the virtues of wisdom, courage, and temperance, resulting in one's liberation from the tyranny of base desires and acquisition of a more accurate understanding and resolute pursuit of the Good." But for Aristotle, the emphasis is more on the individual's capability to choose his acts judiciously or otherwise and bear the consequences arising from them. "In Book III of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle says that, unlike non rational agents, we have the power to do or not to do, and much of what we do is voluntary, such that its origin is 'in us' and we are 'aware of the particular circumstances of the action.' Furthermore, mature humans make choices after deliberating about different available means to our ends, drawing on rational principles of action" (Timothy O'Connor, and Christopher Franklin).

Does there exist any 'compatibility' between fate and free will? Can they coexist without contradictions? This view, called 'compatibilism' is a philosophical school that attempts to reconcile the premise of determinism and free will, proposing that the idea of fate and free will can coexist and that human beings have free will to act and behave as morally responsible agents despite certain inherent constraints that they may have. Human fate may or may not be

compatible with human choices. Theists are of the opinion that gods have their own plans for all human beings, but simultaneously believe that human beings are also granted a free will to choose their actions judiciously within a given scope of his plan.

Stoics are of a belief that since all action is determined by a rational and benevolent cosmic order called 'logos', human beings should subscribe to their natural virtue and innate reasoning capability to live in harmony with this order. Since they have free will, they can choose to act or not to act as they deem fit, but the external events fated by logos would remain constant. As per causal determinism, all events are a consequence of a certain cause and effect relationship that exists between them. They are an integral part of an unbroken chain of events and causes that have been preordained by some higher power, but ultimately it is man himself who is responsible for his own actions. As per *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, "Causal determinism is, roughly speaking, the idea that every event is necessitated by antecedent events and conditions together with the laws of nature." The premise of determinism is that everything is predetermined and preordained by certain cosmic laws and man is merely a plaything who has no control over his actions.

There is a counter view of 'incompatibilism' too which is of the belief that fate and free will cannot coexist peacefully without contradicting each other. According to it, either the free will is non-existent or fate has no impact on human actions.

Existentialists, on the other hand, ascribe greater importance to man's freedom and believe that he is responsible for creating his own essence of life. They reject the idea of fate or divine power as a deterministic force that will contain or limit human autonomy. They believe that man has free will to choose whatever action that he may - good or otherwise, but whatever he chooses, he will have to face the consequences of his choices. Whereas, Libertarians believe that fate has no influence upon human actions since man enjoys absolute freedom to do as he pleases. Similarly, the agnostics assume that fate and free will are neither compatible nor incompatible to each other.

2. Fate & Free Will in Sophocles

Sophocles' plays, *Oedipus Rex*, and *Antigone* amply explore the tension between human agency and divine providence, and the

consequences that man faces while trying to defy or escape his destiny. Destiny, for the classical Greek audience was something which had a divine presence and which could never be doubted, "Destiny find me filled with reverence / pure in word and deed. Great laws tower above us, reared on high / born of the brilliant vault of heaven Olympian Sky their only father, / nothing mortal, no man gave them birth....." (Sophocles, 955-960, 209). In the play, Oedipus, unwittingly becomes a victim of a tragic oracle that had predicted that he will slay his father and marry his mother. "The Delphic oracle...was for Sophocles and his audience, a fact of life, an institution as present and solid, as uncompromising....." (Sophocles, 135), as such, it was firmly believed that the predictions would surely come to a pass. Despite all his efforts and running away to escape the unthinkable, he finds himself helplessly wallowing in the very catastrophe that he took all pains to avoid. He is rendered guilty of parricide and incest with his own mother, Jocasta. This leads to his self-blinding and exile from Thebes, making him a mere plaything tossed around by forces beyond his control. The very fact that he runs away from Corinth on account of some random repartee from a drunkard to find out the truth, is suggestive of the fact that he did believe in predestination and fate. He would not have run away in the first place, had he a good control over his actions i.e., his free will. And Jocasta too would not have abandoned baby Oedipus when she and her husband came to know that their child would bring scourge upon the family.

However, Oedipus is not without his share of free will. He is the tragic protagonist who dons the mantle of a free agent. He does not allow circumstances to trip him over, and relentlessly pursues truth, however heart-wrenching or destructive that might be. He is guilty of hubris too which leads him to be dismissive of Tiresias, the soothsayer and of the god-fearing chorus. In the ancient Greek tragedies, hubris was a precursor to doom, so Oedipus' downfall seemed to be imminent. His multifaceted persona has intrigued scholars and psychologists alike down the ages.

Human behaviour is constantly shaped and reshaped by both internal (like personal choices and free will) and external factors (pre existing circumstances, societal or family influences). Although human beings display free will in making their choices, but these choices may be a fall-out of some unconscious or subconscious motivation, very often beyond their immediate circle of awareness.

Oedipus's struggles with his destiny and free will can be viewed through Leon Festinger's *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* published in 1957, wherein an individual is caught between his own two contradictory beliefs and actions. In their *An Introduction to Cognitive Dissonance Theory* and an *Overview of Current Perspectives* on the Theory, Eddie Harmon-Jones and Judson Mills discuss how it has led to researches "about the determinants of attitudes and beliefs, the internalization of values, the consequences of decisions, the effects of disagreement among persons, and other important psychological processes."

Oedipus's journey could be interpreted as a journey of a man who thinks it is he who is making his choices but is he? Or is he being led by the power of his own unconscious desires and motivations?

As the play opens, Oedipus comes across as an able and conscientious ruler who assures his country-men that he would do his utmost to free them of plague by bringing the murderer of King Laius to the gallows as per the predictions of Delphi. He leaves no stones unturned, he picks a fight with Creon, his judicious brother-in-law, and Tiresias, the very respected soothsayer. Oedipus wanted to provide respite to his people from the onslaught of plague and in this initiative, he was spurred by his inner sense of goodness and justice. Guided by reason, prudence, astuteness, and his feisty spirit, he avowed to undertake a mission that he thought as proper. He freed himself from the clutches of base passions and commenced a journey which he thought was morally appropriate for a king. But as the play progressed, his search for the murderer merged into another search, propelling him to look for his real self. His subconscious desire to circumvent the glaring truth about his and his family's past, resulted in cognitive dissonance in him. He had deliberately pushed the knowledge about the prophecy of killing his father and marrying his mother into deep unconsciousness when he left the city of Corinth for good to build a life anew for himself. As Emile Zola, the 19th century novelist and playwright, wrote, "If you shut up truth and bury it under the ground, it will but grow, and gather to itself such explosive power that the day it bursts through it will blow up everything in its way."

The prophecy did not take long to fulfil when he killed a man old enough to be his father over a minor altercation about the right of way. His destiny led him towards Thebes, to free its citizens from the Sphinx's curse and be hailed as their saviour and new King. And he

was offered the hand of the widowed queen as well. Unbeknownst to him, destiny drove him headlong towards a life which transformed him from a non-entity, country-less wanderer into the most powerful and affluent man in Thebes.

Oedipus' life could also find a resonance in Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory that analyses and studies the development of a child's personality in conjunction with his various environmental factors. Also known as the "bioecological systems theory" it posits that a child's own biology is a primary environment that fuels his development along with his immediate family and community. Conflict in one layer will have a rippling effect in others as well. As such, a child is a sum total of his immediate as well as his larger extended environment as well. The internal and the external factors intertwine and align themselves paving way for his future behaviour. Oedipus's entire life revolved around a series of interconnected environmental systems ranging from the circumstances of his birth, the prophecy about his future, his desertion by his biological family and later his adoption by a childless neighbouring King who kept him in the dark about his antecedents to the broad prevailing societal structures of the classical antiquity, his solving the Sphinx' riddle and saving the Theban citizens from its menace, and getting hailed as their new monarch. Although Oedipus is a self-made man who is an architect of his own destiny, he is also equally responsible for the choices that he made in his life guided by the external circumstances.

Oedipus' downfall could be a consequence of his own conscious choices and a product of the larger cosmic and societal forces that were beyond his control. He chose to play a good Samaritan who promises to help his countrymen rid of the devastating plague that had befallen them.

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle has showered lavish praises on Sophoclean plays for their tightly knit plot structures. Plots are the souls of a drama that keeps the spectators engaged in its action from the beginning to the end. The effect of the tragedy increases manifold when the spectators identify with the figures on the stage and are moved with the changes in their fortunes. This happens because they feel that the protagonists are independent-minded individuals who are free to act according to their free will and are not merely playthings in the hands of Providence alone. It is the meaningful relationship between the hero's actions and his sufferings that accentuates the depth and tragic

intensity of the plot. The external factors, obviously, no one can object or avoid or do away with, but the hero's will has to be independent, un-injected by the serum of his fate. Shakespeare's Macbeth was possessed by the vision of the three witches and the dagger dangling before his eyes, but he was the master of his own freewill. The actions were his and his alone. There was no compulsion for him. He chose to believe in the vision and derived his own interpretations from them. He was a free agent when he said,

"Or art thou but
A dagger of the mind, a false creation,
Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?
I see thee yet, in form as palpable
As this which now I draw.
Thou marshall'st me the way that I was going....."
(*Macbeth* 2.1.37-42)

Had he been bewitched by the witches, then Macbeth would not have been responsible for King Duncan's murder. Instead, he would have been a mere instrument who was used by certain external forces to wipe out the king and thereby be incapable of garnering sympathy from his spectators.

Having said that, also what is required is some causal connection between his actions and his sufferings to give meaning and relevance to the entire experience. The onus of the action and the consequent sufferings would then lead to catharsis.

Sophoclean Oedipus, though was fated to commit patricide and incest, can arguably be a free and independent being who was responsible for unleashing a train of sufferings on himself and his family. The plot of the play centres not on the predestined events that were predicted by the Delphic Oracle, but upon Oedipus's process of discovering the murderer of King Laius who still went unpunished, causing endless plague in Thebes. Little did he know that he had embarked on a monstrous journey to unravel the murderer's identity which turns out to be he himself. Unwittingly, he turned into a detective who was looking for none other than his own self.

The tragedy of Oedipus is thus the tragedy of Oedipus' own actions, it is he who is responsible for his own tragic fate. He is responsible for turning a deaf ear to his brother-in-law Creon's advice to discuss the prophecies of Delphi privately, for refusing to have

faith in the sane counsels of Tiresias, "I charge you, then, submit to that decree / you just laid down: from this day onward / speak to no one, not these citizens, not myself. / You are the curse, the corruption of the land!" (Sophocles, 398-400: 179).

Jocasta tries her best to dissuade Oedipus from probing the truth about his origins, "Stop-in the name of god, / if you love your own life, call off this search! / My suffering is enough" (1162-1164: 222). She calls him "man of agony" (1176: 223) for she had figured out the truth about Oedipus' birth much before he did himself. And having realized their guilt of incest, she runs inside the palace only to hang herself by a silken noose.

The discovery of his identity and parentage leaves him devastated and he rips the brooch off his mother/wife's gown and "digs them down the sockets of his eyes" (1402-1403: 237), crying, "agony! I am agony-- / Where does all this agony hurl me? / Where is my voice? -/ winging, swept away on a dark tide-/ My destiny, my dark power, what a leap you made!" (1443-1448: 239).

The messenger who runs out of the palace to convey the terrible occurrence uses words which reveal that Oedipus's actions were independent and not coerced, "terrible things, and none done blindly now, / all done with a will" (1359-60: 235). Upon being asked by the chorus as to what impelled him to commit such an atrocity upon himself, Oedipus pronounced, "Apollo-he ordained my agonies-these my pains on pains! / But the hand that struck my eyes was mine, / mine alone-no one else-I did it all myself" (1467-71: 241).

The highly intelligent, excessively proud, and proactive Oedipus got so horribly entangled in the echoes of the predictions, that it was but natural for him to give in to some violent impulses. "What I did was best...I with my eyes, / how could I look my father in the eyes when I go down to death? Or mother, so abused...../ I have done such things to the two of them, / crimes too huge for hanging." (1499-1504: 243). He could not have faced his own children/siblings or countrymen.

He also cries, "I am misery...I have stripped myself / I gave the command myself....." (1510-1512: 243). Oedipus, who had prided himself for his intelligence and uprightness, stands exposed to his own blindness. The taunts to Tiresias and Creon reverberate in his mind, but only for a very brief while before he once again begins to reassert himself, reproaching the chorus for wishing him dead rather

than blind. "What I did was best-don't lecture me, no more advice" (1499-1500: 243). The miserable, pitiable man with his imperious persona bounces back once again to defend his act of self-blinding, "My troubles are mine and I am the only man alive who can sustain them" (1548-1549: 244). He begins to issue instructions only to be reminded that he is no longer the king of Thebes. The chorus who had summed up his fate saying that, "Man is equal to nothing" (p. 233) stands corrected and he re-emerges as his former formidable self. Having discovered his true lineage and the gross reality surrounding his blighted life, he feels empowered with the knowledge that "universe is not a field for the play of blind chance, and man is not its measure" (Sophocles, 152).

According to Emmanuel Kant human beings are the masters of their own fate and all their actions and behaviours are right provided they are in tune with everyone else's freedom as per the universal laws. They become architects of their own fate and behave as they inherently are. Oedipus too, behaved the way that he did because he possessed a powerful, passionate, quick-tempered personality and a very inquisitive mind. He owned the responsibility for his actions and transformed himself into a Sartrean hero who was 'condemned to be free' and must "begin his life on the other side of despair" in Colonus. His path of self-discovery humanized him, making him realize his own 'existential aloneness.'

Like her father Oedipus, Antigone also takes the onus upon herself of according burial rites to her brother Polynices against king Creon's royal dictum forbidding anyone to do it. Before she could be executed, she commits suicide, her suicide triggers the suicide of her fiancé Haemon and subsequently of his mother Euridice too, leaving the proud Creon heart-broken and miserable at the drastic turn of events that had taken place. Whether it was Antigone's independent action that sparked a series of foreboding events or whether she was ill-fated to have inherited the curse of her father and forefathers before him? She could have chosen to remain quiet and toed the line like the submissive and conventional-minded Ismene, "We are only women, we're not born to contend with men. / Then too, we're underlings, ruled by much stronger hands....." (74: 62) and a little later, "I'll beg the dead to forgive me, / I'm forced, I have no choice-I must obey / the ones who stand in power" (79-80: 62). Antigone, on the other hand, had the courage and conviction to follow what her conscience dictated her as a moral, religious, and divine right. Like her father, Oedipus,

she too is spurred on by a sense of inner righteousness and justice to defy the unreasonable dictum of Creon, she could not allow Polynices "be left unburied, his corpse carrion for the birds and dogs to tear, / an obscenity for citizens to behold!" (229-231: 68).

The interaction between the Sophoclean characters amply illustrates the clash between the human free will and providence. There is a higher order that is unwittingly pushing the people towards their fate but equally evident is their freedom to act as per their desires. Jocasta who was completely dismissive of the designs of gods, their prophecies, their dreams, believing that man has freedom to act and behave in whichever way he deemed fit gets proven horribly wrong. When Oedipus shares his apprehension of the Delphic prediction of him sharing his mother's bed, she dismisses it categorically, saying,

"What should a man fear?

It's all chance, chance rules our lives.

Not a man on earth can see a day ahead,
groping through the dark.

Better to live at random, best we can.

And as for the marriage with your mother-have no fear.

Many a man before you, in his dreams,
has shared his mother's bed.

Take such things as shadows, nothing at all-

Live Oedipus, as if there's no tomorrow" (1069-1078: 215).

But the grave realization that she had procreated with her own biological son drives her to commit suicide.

Oedipus had a choice right from the beginning whether to pursue the truth or not, whether to exercise his freedom to find out the truth behind the prophecies, the oracles, the gods or his own lineage. Despite being warned enough number of times by Creon, Tiresias, Jocasta, he uses his freedom as judiciously as he could and continues his pursuit relentlessly. And through his pursuit, what comes to the fore is not him being a mere plaything in the hands of destiny but a headstrong, passionate, and courageous man who emerges victorious despite what fate had ordained for him.

3. Conclusion

The master craftsmanship of Sophoclean plays is suggestive of the premise that neither human freedom nor meaningful acts hold

any respite for mankind. Since the clash between fate and free will is an ongoing and fascinating one and impacts lives all around, it also invites us to reflect on our own beliefs, values systems, our actions, and their outcomes. It challenges us to find a right balance between accepting what we cannot change and changing what we can. It inspires us to seek a deeper understanding of ourselves and the world around us. As Jean-Paul Sartre in his *Being and Nothingness* writes, "Man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, in other respects is free; because, once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does. The Existentialist does not believe in the power of passion. He will never agree that a sweeping passion is a ravaging torrent which fatally leads a man to certain acts and is therefore an excuse. He thinks that man is responsible for his passion."

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Exploring India's Maritime Foreign Policy in Southeast Asia: The SAGAR Initiative

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Abstract

The present article is the project of ongoing research project on Indian foreign policy sanctioned by ICSSR and academic collaboration with Dr. Dahiya. The Maritime Territory of India consists of a vast stretch of 7517 km of coastline and more than 1200 islands. That's why Indian foreign policy is heavily reliant on matters related to maritime security. Indian foreign policy prioritizes humanistic values drawn from ancient Indian texts, traditions, and culture i.e. everything is part of the same existence spectrum; there are differences amongst creations in terms of consciousness. The Indian government published the country's first maritime doctrine in 2004 and later in 2007 and revised in 2009. The maritime cooperation framework within the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is fundamentally shaped by the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) doctrine notably delivered by the PM Narendra Modi in 2015. Accordingly, India has redesigned its current policies to deal with coastline security, piracy, climate change, human trafficking, drugs smuggling, seaborne economic activities, blue economy and maritime terrorism as issues of critical strategic importance in response to China. The goal of SAGAR strategy is to advance economic development and security for all of the Southeast Asian region's countries. It also aims to establishing a trusting and transparent atmosphere, addressing regional concerns, increasing marine collaboration and decreasing international marine disputes in the IOR. The present article purposes to examine several maritime events and projects that are credited to SAGAR, as well as to provide a list of related Indian initiatives. The paper also explains the five fundamental facts Samvad, Samman, Sahyog, Samridhi and Shanti articulated by the PM Modi in his keynote address in 2015, with the goal of elucidating the components of SAGAR.

Keywords

India's foreign policy, Maritime security, Strategic environment, Southeast Asia.

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1. Introduction

Southeast Asia is a region in the southeastern part of Asia, positioned between China, the Indian subcontinent, and Oceania. The Maritime Southeast Asia mostly lies in the Northern Hemisphere, which is the only Asian subregion that extends into the Southern Hemisphere (Southeast Asia - Rainforest, Mangroves, Flora | Britannica, 2025). Geographically, these states are classified into two groups: mainland and island states. Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Malaysia are Mainland States, whereas Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei, and the Philippines are Island States. Southeast Asia includes the regions of East Timor and southern Indonesia. It encompasses around 4,500,000 km² (1,700,000 sq miles), or 3% of Earth's total surface area, and 8% of Eurasia. With about 675 million people living there, it makes up around 8.5% of the global population (Ahmadzai *et al.*, 2022). After East and South Asia, it is the third most populated area in Asia. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a regional organization formed to foster economic, cultural integration, political, educational, and military among its members. The economies of ASEAN members are among the fastest-growing in the world. The phrase "South-east Asia" was first used during the World War II, when the Allies established "South-east Asia Command" in an effort to free the region of Asia's southeast from Japanese rule. Since then, the region that lies south of China and east of India has been designated as a Southeast Asian country (Gotô, 2003).

India-ASEAN ties improved dramatically in 2022, moving from a dialogue partnership formed in the 1990s to a multifaceted strategic alliance. In June, the ASEAN-India Foreign Ministers met specially to commemorate their 30th anniversary, with a focus on digital connectivity, commerce, investments, security, military, and climate sustainability. India's extending focus on security became evident through its inclusion in ASEAN-led forums such as the ARF and ADMM+. The evolution from the Look East to the Act East policy

further strengthened maritime cooperation, driven not only by past humanitarian efforts but also by strategic considerations, particularly in response to China's expanding influence. Examples of this include its relief mission for the 2004 tsunami and its continued naval training with ASEAN nations since 2002. Concerns over China's increasing power are shared by ASEAN and India, especially with regard to its broad "open seas protection" policy in the Indo-Pacific area (Manhas, 2024). Due to security concerns, this has resulted in increasing collaboration between India and the nations of Southeast Asia. Beyond opposing China, though, India and ASEAN work together on a number of topics, including defense, cyber security, transnational crime, and sustainable development. The necessity of collaboration has been even more highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in fields like healthcare, disaster relief, and vaccine delivery. The evolving discourse encircling the Indo-Pacific presents new possibilities to deepen maritime collaboration between India and ASEAN.

The SAGAR, a strategic marine doctrine launched by the PM Narendra Modi in 2015, attempts to strengthen cooperation with maritime neighbors, particularly within the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), to maintain collective security and Sustainable growth. The SAGAR stresses a comprehensive strategy that includes marine security, trade, infrastructure development, disaster management, and environmental conservation (Bajpae, 2022). It aims to strengthen economic integration, address security concerns, prosperity, stability, and peace within the region (Sarangi, 2019). Modi's speech on March 12, 2015 at the hiring function of Mauritius National Coast Guard's Ship Barracuda serves as commencement of outlining the SAGAR vision. This was later reinforced by two key speeches delivered by Sushma Swaraj, former Minister of External Affairs, at the second and third Indian Ocean Conferences.

2. India's Maritime Policy in Modi Regime

India has become extremely aware of the potential of terrorist attacks by sea ever since the Mumbai terror assault at the end of November 2008. The importance of maritime security, commons, and collaboration has increased in the current geopolitical environment. India has been a passive participant within the Indian Ocean for quite some time, without a robust and visible maritime policy. In recent years, India's maritime policy and strategy have

increasingly embraced a more pragmatic and adaptive approach, aligning with the evolving geopolitical dynamics of the region. India needs to safeguard its maritime frontiers, realize its economic ambitions, and transition from a potential regional power to a single, dominant force in the Indian Ocean Rim. That is feasible, but only with a daring, adaptable, creative, and cooperative marine policy. In March 2015, during his trip to the Mauritius and Seychelles, The Prime Minister Modi made it clear that India's top strategic priority is the IOR. Our goal for the Indian Ocean Region is centered on strengthening regional collaboration and utilizing our resources to benefit everyone who lives in our shared marine home. On June 1, 2018, speaking at the Shangri-La Dialogue, Prime Minister Narendra Modi highlighted SAGAR as the guiding principle behind India's intensified engagement with the East, facilitated by the Act East Policy. This vision is expressed for the IOR; of course, the reason for using "our" so frequently is to emphasize how inclusive the Indian perspective is. "The benefit of all" is the clear end objective for the collaboration. The PM Modi outlined a five-point plan for India's maritime cooperation within the IOR in his address in Mauritius (Upadhyaya, 2020). At the core of Prime Minister Modi's policies lies a steadfast commitment to safeguarding India's maritime interests and ensuring the security of both its mainland and island territories. Additionally, India remains highly attuned to the Indian Ocean's growing strategic significance in global affairs. According to Modi, New Delhi *"will work to ensure a safe, secure and stable Indian Ocean Region that delivers us all to the shores of prosperity"*, even though the countries own interests come first. The subsequent feature of Modi's plan concentrates on strengthening security collaboration with partners in the region, notably Seychelles and Mauritius. In Seychelles, Modi promised an additional Dornier plane for maritime monitoring, secured agreements for hydrographic research and started a radar project for shoreline surveillance. The goal of this project is to set up surveillance radars in the Indian Ocean at several points, for instance, in Maldives, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, as well as Seychelles, and connect them to an analytic center close to Delhi. While in Mauritius, Modi signed agreements for the construction of infrastructure in key places and commissioned an offshore patrol boat built in India. India hopes to gain strategic footholds in the South Western Indian Ocean through these programs, which also aim to strengthen defensive capabilities in the area. The third stage of

Modi's strategy focuses on establishing collaborative multilateralism marine security in the IOR. The Prime Minister Modi emphasized India's commitment to supporting and strengthening regional mechanisms to combat terrorism, counter- piracy, and respond effectively to natural disasters. He also expressed optimism that the existing trilateral security cooperation with the Maldives and Sri Lanka would expand to include Mauritius, Seychelles, and other regional partners. With India at its core, this vision lays the foundation for robust and inclusive multilateral maritime security collaboration in the IOR. Furthermore, 4th key concept of his maritime policy is the pursuit of sustainable economic growth. The PM Modi declared the establishment of a cooperative working group in Seychelles to enhance collaboration on the blue economy, aiming to deepen the understanding of marine ecology and resources among littoral states while promoting the sustainable use of oceanic wealth. He also demonstrated a decisive commitment to addressing the concerns of island nations regarding climate change.

Notably, Modi has moved beyond India's traditional hesitancy in engaging with major powers in the Indian Ocean, signaling a more open and cooperative approach to regional maritime governance. Modi made an oblique allusion to the involvement of the USA in the region through conversation, economic ties, military exercises and capacity development initiatives, even as he insisted that governments in the IOR have primary accountable for maintaining peace, stability, security, and prosperity in those seas. In Mauritius, Modi solidified this plan by declaring that *"our goal is to seek a climate of trust and transparency; respect for international maritime rules and norms by all countries; sensitivity to each other's interests; peaceful resolution of maritime issues; and increase in maritime cooperation."* Modi has, meanwhile, kept the door open for China even as he suggests a different strategy toward the United States. His open communication with the USA may actually strengthen New Delhi's negotiating position with Beijing (Mohan, 2015).

In Singapore on 1st June, 2018, PM Modi gave a keynote speech at the IISS (International Institute for Strategic Studies). He presented an overview of India's Indo-Pacific policy using the five Hindi words starts with S's: Samvad (discussion), Samman (respect), Sahyog (cooperation), Samridhi (prosperity), and Shanti (peace), therefore prepared the groundwork for us to take on a more significant role in the Indo-Pacific and Indian Ocean area (IOR). Speaking on August 31,

2017, during the 2nd Indian Ocean Conference in Sri Lanka, former EAM Sushma Swaraj listed the following components as a vision of SAGAR. Firstly, strengthening the ability to protect interests and areas on the land and in the sea. Secondly, strengthening security and economic cooperation throughout the region. Thirdly, encouraging cooperation in the fight against terrorism, natural disasters, and rising non-state actors in the maritime domain. Fourthly, working to improve cooperation in order to achieve sustainable regional development. Finally, engaging with international partners to promote mutual respect for maritime laws, uphold established customs, and encourage the peaceful resolution of disputes remains a key priority. *“The EAM spoke at the Third Indian Ocean Conference in Vietnam on August 27, 2018, where she went into further detail about infrastructure development and connectivity through SAGAR Projects. She outlines in her speech SAGAR is aiming to promote hinterland linkages and strengthen regional connectivity, Connecting South Asia to South East Asia; actively and constructively contributing to the improvement of marine security in the region”* (Sarangi, 2019).

In November 2014, “Look East Policy” was revitalized and redefined with the introduction of “Act East Policy”, signaling a more proactive and engagement-driven approach. It is a diplomatic endeavor to advance, on several fronts, strategic, commercial, and cultural ties with the enormous “Asia-Pacific region”. It entails extensive and ongoing bilateral, regional, and international involvement with nations in Southeast Asia concerning connectivity, trade, culture, defense, and people-to-people interaction. *“The objective behind this move is to strengthen economic cooperation, deepen cultural connections, and cultivate strategic partnerships with nations across the Indo-Pacific region through a dynamic and action-oriented approach, India’s Act East Policy aims to strengthen its political, economic, and security ties with Southeast Asia and Indo-Pacific nations while countering China’s ascent to prominence”* (Rajagopalan, 2020).

3. India’s Maritime Relations with ASEAN

India has long maintained ties with its neighbors in the East, “Act East policy”, simply a fresh expression of long-standing relationship with neighboring nations. India launched its “Look East Policy” in the aftermath of the ‘Cold War’, seeking to navigate the shifting global landscape following the collapse of bipolar world politics with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. As a result of abrupt changes in the political landscape of the world, India reestablished its links with

ASEAN, shifting relations with its near neighbors, and a recently opened economy. This started when India started seeking for ways to expand and improve its economy, which led to a drive for closer economic links. The focus of PM Modi's remarks was to emphasize the importance of bilateral as well as multilateral relationships, with a particular emphasis on strategic, defense, counterterrorism, cultural, economic, and interpersonal links. In practical terms, "Act East Policy" became focused on strengthening ties with ASEAN nations, particularly in areas critical to domestic development. This included collaboration on infrastructure, seamless trade, and skill enhancement—both technical and soft—along with key initiatives such as Make in India and smart city projects, among others. Enhancing regional cooperation and integration can be facilitated by connectivity initiatives such as space technology, port development, as well as people-to-people connections. A larger focus was also placed on disaster management and climate change, both because of the potential benefits of the blue economy. As India's gateway to Southeast Asia, the northeastern area has also drawn more attention. *"India's partnership with ASEAN was further reinforced through active engagement in regional organizations such as ASEAN, BIMSTEC, the ARF, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meetings, the East Asia Summit (EAS), the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation framework, and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS)"* (S. Singh & Marwah, 2024). With the adoption of the "Act East Policy", the Indo-Pacific region has evolved into a pivotal geostrategic framework. *"Over time, it has gained prominence as a key geopolitical landscape, shaping regional and global dynamics. India believes in an Indo-Pacific region that is safe, prosperous, interconnected, free, equitable, inclusive, open, and resilient, and that is moving toward sustainable development, according to the Ministry of External Affairs of India"* (Baruah, 2020). India has fully integrated the Indo-Pacific framework into its strategic vision, creating a dedicated division within the Ministry of External Affairs to oversee its engagement. Through initiatives such as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity, India continues to champion a free, open, and inclusive regional order.

4. India-ASEAN Naval Exercises

Due to their lengthy coastlines and rich maritime histories, India along with the other nations in ASEAN have natural ties to the water. Also, because of their shared geographic location, all of these

countries are acutely aware of the many opportunities and difficulties that come with living there, which has sparked their interest in forming alliances to guarantee marine security. In recent decades, there has been an increased emphasis on joint humanitarian aid, disaster relief efforts, naval diplomacy, and naval drills. As a result, their fleets have become more closely coordinated, which is still essential for their joint collaboration with the greater Indo-Pacific area. The following are a few of these genres: -

Passage Exercises: As per NATO Maritime Command, they are bilateral exercises in which ships cooperate and move alongside and around one another while practicing communication and navigation skills. Regular bilateral and multilateral PASSEX exercises are conducted by the Indian Navy. These support the maintenance of capabilities that defy international norms and aid in the improvement of operational skills (Indian Navy, 2015). For example, in February and May of 2021, India and Indonesia performed the Passage Exercise (PASSEX). *“In May, the Indonesian Navy, under the command of KRI Sultan Hasanudin, collaborated with the Indian Navy, which deployed INS Sharda along with a Chetak helicopter, to enhance maritime coordination. Similarly, in 2020, India and Vietnam conducted a two-day transit exercise in the South China Sea, further strengthening their maritime cooperation”* (Manhas, 2024).

Exercises that occur on occasion: The Indian Navy actively engages in periodic naval exercises, fostering interoperability and strategic cooperation with various nations, including China. Among these, the Milan and Malabar exercises stand out as some of the most enduring and significant maritime engagements. The more recent naval drills involve the United States, Japan, Australia, and India—the four countries that make up the Quadrilateral Security Framework. The most frequent of these are humanitarian aid-driven drills, which are designed to maintain maritime safety and other small-scale norms on high seas that occasionally may cause unwarranted tensions (Navy I. , 2015). In the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami, regional navies, including the Indian Navy, prioritized Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations, extending their efforts both domestically and internationally. The Indian Navy is in charge of the twice-yearly Indian Ocean Fleet to support such peacetime activities and projects. The Naval Symposium’s (IONS) HADR Working Group. *“The goal of this is to create an action plan for the warships of the Indian Ocean Region to*

construct a coordinated HADR response and other instances of these bilateral or multilateral drills with ASEAN nations” (Navy I , n.d.).

5. Maritime Security Challenges and the SAGAR

Situated at the intersections of the Indo-Pacific, Southeast Asia hosts some of the world's most critical sea lanes and strategic maritime straits, underscoring its significance in global trade and security. The region's coastal areas are also a major source of income, a vital conduit for intraregional travel, and an integral part of its cultural legacy. Although the focus of most extra-regional attention is on the escalating disputes in the “South China Sea”, the wider marine area of Southeast Asia is a highly complex, perils to environment with several additional hazards lurking that might endanger a variety of marine stake holding groups. Understanding and interpreting this complexity is essential to comprehending the wide range of emerging and persistent dangers that Southeast Asia is currently facing. Security perspectives in Southeast Asia have often diverged from Western frameworks, particularly in how they define and distinguish between conventional and non-traditional security challenges. The immediate challenges of post-colonial state-building within the framework of growing Cold War rivalry were mirrored in Southeast Asian security strategy, which sought to prioritize the strengthening of national resilience. National resilience, which was rather broad, meant that states would react to a variety of risks that may jeopardize the development of powerful, centralized, and industrialized countries.

The maritime risks facing Southeast Asia are diverse in form, but they all affect sea users and undermine resilience by eroding the profitability of licit marine operations. Amid evolving security challenges, resilience is no longer confined to the particular countries as the sole focus of safety concerns. Instead, there is a rising recognition that protecting key institutions and organizations is equally vital to ensuring the safety and stability of maritime regions. While occasionally criticized for its inaction, the 2007 ASEAN charter's trend towards “people-centered, people-oriented communities” has highlighted a general awareness that people need to be safeguarded. The process is being accelerated by extra regional pressure as human security becomes the norm everywhere. Because of their interdependencies, the region's many problems-such as

forced labor, IUU fishing, and environmental degradation-must be addressed holistically. When addressing IUU fishing without taking the human security aspect into account, vessel personnel that have been tricked or coerced might become victims. Furthermore, since millions of people in Southeast Asia rely on fisheries for their food and livelihoods, healthy oceans are essential for the resilience of nations and communities. The idea of the “blue economy” highlights the potential for riches found in the seas, but it also underlines the necessity of sustainability. Cross-border tensions raise the possibility of interstate warfare by adding another level of complexity to maritime security issues, especially in the South China Sea. While classic security risks like piracy have been addressed with some success, other issues like cyber-insecurity and climate change still need to be addressed. For marine security initiatives in the area to be effective, it is imperative that the interconnectedness of these challenges be acknowledged (Bradford, 2023).

China’s growing naval capabilities and assertive stance in the South China Sea present shared strategic challenges for India and ASEAN, underscoring the need for greater regional cooperation. India fears rising Chinese military presence in the Indian Ocean, while ASEAN countries are concerned about China’s presence in the South China Sea, where four states have competing claims. India’s defense cooperation with these countries is significant, even though media attention is frequently directed toward China’s issues with larger ASEAN states like the Philippines and Vietnam (Bekkevold & Kalyanaraman, 2020). But smaller ASEAN nations also look to India for assistance in reducing their reliance on China, which might hinder China’s efforts to expand throughout the Indo-Pacific region. One point of concern between Brunei and China is the Muara port and naval station, from which most of the nation’s gas as well oil is shipped to India. China is become more vocal about its contradictory claims. Due to Brunei’s EEZ, it exposes India’s supply vulnerable to China’s conflicts. Establishing more maritime connection by providing naval escorting between the ports of Brunei and the eastern ports of India, is one method to get over this challenge. Increasing collaboration between two nations outside the realm of oil and gas may also be achieved via partnering across diverse sectors. With a few other ASEAN states, India has recently become a significant defense partner; this relationship may also be extended to

Brunei. The worldwide supply network for hydrogen in Brunei, demonstration facility at Industrial Park of Sungai Liang, demonstrates the enormous potential for India-Brunei energy collaboration (Bhattacharjee, 2018). Similar to this, news of a military complex sponsored by China in Cambodia that confronts the contentious South China Sea has made each of the regional players aware of its potential consequences particularly India. Another Chinese facility near India's periphery, after Djibouti and the Solomon Islands, would raise concerns. China may be able to have perpetual access to the Indian Ocean through this facility. China *"signed an undisclosed agreement which permits its military and armed forces to use a part of Ream Naval Base, located on Cambodia's southern coast fronting the Gulf of Thailand"*, according to a 2019 Washington Post story (SAHA, 2022). There are plenty of chances for India and Cambodia to strengthen their relationship, even if China has a large investment advantage in Cambodia. Digitalization, tourism, the sale of defense equipment, and infrastructure connectivity-particularly with India's northeastern region-are important areas for partnership. India's influence may also be increased via its soft power resources. Cooperation between these industries might be accelerated by implementing fast impact projects. Cambodia seeks India's collaboration as a strategic counterbalance to China's expanding influence in the country's investment landscape. With the recent tensions with China, India has a chance to establish a strategic alliance with Malaysia. In response to Chinese violations of airspace, Malaysia has asserted its sovereignty, which is consistent with India's pledge to uphold UNCLOS and maintain maritime sovereignty. While the ASEAN countries interact with Beijing in different ways, Malaysia has made a strong stand against abuses of sovereignty. Collaboration is based on India's multifaceted links with ASEAN, which are based on mutual respect for maritime borders. ASEAN along with India can work together to offset China's escalating impact in the area, particularly across the Strait of Malacca. In this endeavor, collaborations with neighboring countries such as Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia, India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands, are vital assets (BBC, 2021). The nine-dash line, which represents China's increasing claims in the South China Sea, has escalated patrols and violated the sovereignty of ASEAN member nations' airspace and marine areas.

Although ASEAN does not have a unified position, individual countries such as Malaysia are strongly against Beijing's invasion of their sovereignty. *"This strengthens ties with ASEAN and is consistent with India's commitment to upholding UNCLOS and preserving maritime sovereignty in the area. When working together, ASEAN along with India can balance off China's increasing influence, especially across the vital Strait of Malacca, India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands, as well as alliances with countries that border them, such as Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia, are essential to this effort"* (Singh et al., 2022).

Myanmar is strategically crucial for India as a gateway to Southeast Asia. India seeks to strengthen its developmental partnership with Myanmar several initiatives such as KMTTP, BIMSTEC etc. Partnership prospects are further enhanced by the SAGAR vision. India's infrastructure projects and defense supplies may help Myanmar, and India also shows that it can work with both democratic and military forces. There is other potential for partnership between India and Myanmar through quick impact initiatives in fields like digitalization, cyber security, and agriculture. Tensions have escalated between the Philippines and China, especially over the Scarborough Shoal, which is why India has sent Manila its BrahMos cruise missiles. This alliance complements India's proactive defense cooperation and Atmanirbhar Bharat initiative, while also strengthening the Philippines' defense capabilities. The purchase of BrahMos missiles strengthens Philippine sovereignty by acting as an eye on China's incursions into its territorial seas. The two countries have also increased their naval drills and training, as well as their collaboration in energy, mutual investments, and maritime security. Vietnam is the only ASEAN member that has engaged in direct heated battles with Beijing. Vietnam wants India to be a powerful partner in order to neutralize, if not overcome, the China threat as it forges strong ties with China (Reena Marwah, 2021).

An Indian Space Research Organization-supported satellite monitoring facility near Ho Chi Minh, gathering intelligence and conducts surveillance on Chinese activity in the region. *"Vietnam may now see photos transmitted by Indian satellites for earth observation that keep an eye on the South China Sea"* (Torode, 2016). This type of high-level partnership is expected to spread to the member of ASEAN, demonstrates that, despite China's comparative advantage in economic cooperation, India continues to be ASEAN's preferred partner when matters related to technology transfer as well as mutual trust.

6. The Prime Minister Narendra Modi's speech on March 12, 2015, at the Commissioning Ceremony

"Our marine forces will work together to share intelligence, support other littoral states with their coastal monitoring, create deep seaports and other facilities, and boost our capabilities through maritime cooperation in the IOR. The SAGAR initiative plays a crucial role in counterbalancing China's expanding influence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). China has integrated its String of Pearls strategy into the broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), steadily increasing its maritime footprint through the development of a Maritime Silk Road. To safeguard its strategic interests and enhance its presence in key littoral states along vital Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), China continues to make substantial investments and foster deeper cooperation with regional partners."

China has made significant expenditures on the current maritime silk route, mostly for military and geopolitical purposes in addition to commercial ones. India must counter China's influence by strengthening its ties with its neighbors, updating its navy quickly, and upgrading and modernizing its maritime projects. SAGAR will assist in utilizing our blue economy to further our socioeconomic objectives. The sustainable use of ocean resources for enhanced economic growth, a healthy ecology, and social benefits such as better lives and job possibilities is referred to as the "blue economy". The Indian Ocean region is rich in resources, especially when it comes to fields like waste management, renewable energy, tourism, seabed mining and minerals, fisheries, aquaculture, and marine transportation. India must thus make the most of its extensive coastline in addition to working with other members of the IORA, be visible and cooperative for the sustainable use of Indian Ocean resources, and utilize "blue diplomacy". The Ministry of Shipping intends to revitalize the deteriorating maritime infrastructure, particularly the ports and freight processing capacity, as part of the SAGARMALA Project. The project calls for significant investments in infrastructure to modernize key seaports, expand navigable rivers on land, increase capacity, modernize, and support port-led industrial growth. Therefore, it can be said that this project is providing the impetus required for the SAGAR effort to succeed in order to promote commerce and business (Kumar, 2017). Furthermore, assistance with the development of marine infrastructure may be provided to other nations including Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Oman, and Iran. During the COVID first wave, Mission SAGAR was

established under Vision SAGAR and offered the nations in the IOR support pertaining to COVID-19. Food supplies, medications, vaccinations, and the dispatch of Medical Assistance Teams were all part of the help. Engaging neighboring nations during times of crises was a wise move (Soumyodeep Deb, 2023). The SAGAR Initiative emphasizes how important ASEAN is in facilitating commerce and managing fisheries. India should take the lead in implementing ASEAN's current and future initiatives, which include developing centers of excellence for maritime safety and security, exchanging data on marine transpiration systems, investigating regional surveillance networks, and conducting training and capacity development programs. This will help to fortify relationships with certain ASEAN members.

7. Conclusion

India and ASEAN have developed a mutually beneficial partnership throughout time. They have established a solid working relationship in the fields of environmental protection, defense cooperation, economic growth, and combating the danger of terrorism. They have also taken steps to challenge China's growing influence in their region. Their marine cooperation is supported by all of these factors, which are represented in it. India's attempts to fortify its bilateral and multilateral ties with ASEAN countries have been driven by its Look East and Act East policies, which have been in place since the 1990s and 2014. The SAGAR and IPOI plans of the PM Narendra Modi attest to India's desire to discuss marine security, maritime commons, collaboration, and capacity building with every country in Southeast Asia. India's constant assertion as the South China Sea as a worldwide mutual underscores its commitment to fostering stability and reducing tensions in the region. Through the SAGAR initiative, India has engaged comprehensively with Southeast Asian nations, spanning key areas such as information exchange, coastal research, infrastructure development, and capacity building, reinforcing its vision for a secure and cooperative maritime domain. By exchanging defense equipment and updating ports, especially in the Andaman and Nicobar region, ASEAN along with India are fortifying their marine cooperation. Ensuring open passage and safeguarding important marine routes such as the Malacca Strait depend heavily on this collaboration. In addition to opposing China, its alliance uses both soft and physical power and cultural affinities to generate positive answers to problems in the area. India is a

regional force that ASEAN needs to assist in light of the rising security risks. India needs ASEAN collaboration in order to offset China's influence. Together, with well-established alliances across several industries, they seek to use possibilities and tackle obstacles, especially those presented by China's ascent. In order to promote mutual confidence and understanding for their developing maritime cooperation, collaboration takes place at both the bilateral and international levels.

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