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DIALOGUE

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Contents

Editorial Perspective	7
1. Mapping India-Russia Relations in a Complex Global Geopolitical Order <i>Dr. Nalin Kumar Mohapatra</i>	8
2. Changing Contour of The Indo-Pacific Geopolitical Space: India's Rejigged Indo-Pacific Strategy and The Way Ahead <i>Dr. Akshay K. Singh & Vidushi</i>	41
3. Power, Conflict and Gendered Struggles in South Asia: The Intersection of Political Instability and Displacement <i>Tehmeena Rizvi</i>	56
4. A Step Towards Legal Transformation in India Through New Criminal Laws: An Analytical Study <i>Dr. Taruna Solanki and Govind Gupta</i>	69
5. Synergising Health and Environmental Sustainability: A Study of the Meghalaya State Pollution Control Board's Role in Achieving the United Nations SDG 3 and SDG 13 in Industrial Areas <i>Altricia Synrem and Dr. Md. Nazeer Hussain</i>	76
6. Personal Laws, Gender Inequality and Empowerment: A Review <i>Gurpinder Kumar</i>	99
7. Unveiling the Tapestry of 'Mithila' and 'Maithili': Exploring the Interplay of Language, Culture, Geography, Economy, Education, and Social Dynamics through a Historical Lens <i>Dr. Sudipta Adhikary, Dr. Paramita Bhattacharyya and Dr. Kaushik Banerjee</i>	110
DIALOGUE, Volume-26 No. 3	5

8. Between Faith and Freedom: The Representation of Muslim Women in Malabar's Literary and Cultural Landscape	119
<i>Dr. Joseph Mathew and Dr. Minna Ann Andrews</i>	
GUIDELINES FOR SUBMISSION	131

Editorial Perspective

We present the latest edition of *Dialogue*, which continues to serve as a platform for inclusive discourse, multidisciplinary scholarship, and critical reflection on issues of contemporary significance. As we move through an era defined by rapid change across social, political, cultural, and technological realms, the need for thoughtful, grounded, and plural conversations becomes ever more essential.

This edition brings together an insightful collection of articles that reflect the complexity of the world we inhabit. The themes explored are wide-ranging yet interconnected, touching upon India-Russia Relations, the introduction of new criminal laws in India, State Pollution Control Board's role in Meghalaya, the gendered impacts of conflict and displacement in South Asia, the evolving strategic landscape of the Indo-Pacific region, and the enduring tensions between personal laws and the pursuit of gender equality. Other contributions delve into regional cultural histories, examining the intricate relationship between language, identity, and socio-economic structures, while also reflecting on how literature and cultural narratives shape our understanding of faith, freedom, and representation.

From questions of law and strategy to the subtleties of cultural memory and everyday resistance, this edition seeks to illuminate the many ways in which the personal and political, the regional and global, continually intersect.

As we bring this edition to you, we do so with a renewed commitment to fostering critical engagement, empathy, and curiosity. We are grateful to our contributors for their thoughtful scholarship and to our readers for their continued support in making *Dialogue* a space of meaningful exchange.

Warm regards,

P C Haldar

President
Astha Bharti

Mapping India-Russia Relations in a Complex Global Geopolitical Order

Dr. Nalin Kumar Mohapatra*

Introduction

One of the major features of the post-Cold War era is that it creates an “uncertain” geopolitical order, contributing to the complexity. This complexity stems from a prolonged global economic recession and the subsequent onset of the pandemic. Similarly, the war between Russia and Ukraine in the “heartland” of Eurasia, as well as the war between Israel and Hamas, to a great extent, put global geopolitics under stress. Along with this, the insecurity scenario of the Indo-Pacific, largely due to China’s aggressive behaviors, also affects global geopolitics. All these strategic developments have also impacted supply securitization, influencing the global economy. This propels one to consider whether the post-Second World War security scenario of Cold War rivalry is returning to the global order. Though the Cold War era ideological division between socialism and capitalism is non-existent, Western countries have a new form of ideological dominance in the name of “democracy promotion”. This is also promoting ideological dissonance in global geopolitics. Some of these above complexities add a new form of uncertainty to the global security structure (Walt, 2020; Karaganov, 2024; Mohapatra, 2023; Mohapatra, 2024c; Sen, 2025).

Notwithstanding these complexities in global order, one issue that needs much attention is the state of relations between India and Russia, which is “civilizational” in nature. This civilizational relationship has fostered mutual bonhomie between the two countries and has turned into a “special and privileged strategic partnership”

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over the years. The present article will delve into some aspects of the relationship between India and Russia (Kaushik, 1993; Economic Times, 2025). The article will also examine four major questions revolving around India-Russia relations. These are:

- a) Does the historical context provide the bedrock for the present relations between India and Russia?
- b) Is the present global geopolitical structure influencing relations between India and Russia?
- c) To explain the state of geopolitical and geo-economic engagement between India and Russia?
- d) What are the problem areas of bilateral engagement between India and Russia?

The present article will conform to the following hypotheses. These are:

- a) The civilizational relationship between India and Russia has provided the basis for building a more robust relationship between both countries in recent years.
- b) Geopolitical realignment and geo-economic basis are the factors that synergize India and Russia's relations.

Given the complexities of the issues to be addressed in the present research article, it will adopt a web of methodological frameworks ranging from historical, comparative as well as descriptive.

Civilizational Relations

One of the quintessential features of India-Russia relations is the civilizational character of the relations (Kaushik, 1993). This adds much substance to the bilateral relations in the present context. Some of India's holy *Puranas* (Hindu religious scriptures) have dealt extensively with India's cultural relations with the Arctic and Siberian regions of Russia. Even Indian holy scriptures, such as the *Rig Veda* and *Mahabharata*, mention *Meru* (Sumeru) Mountain, located in the above region of Russia. Similarly, the holy Puranas of the Hindu religion have mentioned that "Meru is the home or seat of all the gods". (Tilak, 1925, p.61 and 67). It has been observed that from this Sacred Mountain flows the "immortal lake" Anavatapta, which is considered sacred (Mabbett, 1983). It has also been mentioned in the *Mahabharat* that when the Mountain Vindhyan asked Lord Surya to give him equal prominence along with Meru. To this Lord, Surya replied, "I do not of

my own will honour this mountain by my circumambulations. This path has been assigned to me by that one by whom this universe was built.”(Mabbett, pp. 68-69). It has been further observed that with the blessings of Lord Surya, the mountain Meru has been “golden coloured” (Mabbett, pp. 68-69).

Similarly, famous Russian Painter Nicholas Roerich delved deeply into the geo-spiritual connection between the Himalayan Mountain region and Mount Meru. (Zhernosenko,2022, p.89). Along with Hindu religious scriptures, both Buddhism and Jainism (originated in India) have also discussed much about the Meru Mountain (Schwartzbrg, 1992). The discovery of the statue of Lord Vishnu in the Staraya Maina village located in the Ulyanovsk Region reflects the prevalence of Hindu culture in this part of Russia (History News Network, 2007).

It is not only Hinduism that influenced Russian society, even the impact of Buddhism on Russia can also be observed. In this context, it can be mentioned that the *Vajrayana* (Tantric) form of Buddhism, which originated in India, is being widely practiced in Siberia and the Far East region, and also in the Kalmyk region of Russia (Bernstein 2012).

Since a new theory of Out of India (OIT) has also gained wider acceptance in recent years, which reject the Aryan Migration Theory (AIT) on the basis of “new genetic studies” as well as “scientific linguistic evidences”. It can be justifiable that the territory of present-day Arctic and Siberia of Russia, where Mount Meru is located, along with Central Asia, were under India’s sphere of influence in the historical past (Talgiri, 2020; Bhargav, 1968; Lal, 2022; Prasanna, 2012; Iyengar, 1912).¹

A cursory look at the religious practices of Russian people before their conversion to Orthodox Christianity closely reflects the influence of Indian culture and traditions. For instance, the Indian philosophical traditions of *Moksha* (liberation) can be seen in the Russian practice of *Mokosh*. Also, the concept of heaven (Swarga) has been present in the Russian traditions in the form of Svaroh (Petro,1988, pp.255-256). Also, studies further suggest that the name Volga might come from the Sanskrit word *Var* (Rishi,1982, p.18). Studies suggest that Panini’s *Aṣṭādhyāyī* Sanskrit Grammar has also influenced the Russian Grammar. W R Rishi, an Indian scholar, lists several such words where the influence of Sanskrit on the Russian language can be inferred (Rishi,1982, pp. 27-29; Gilon, 2007, p. 457).

As stated by Russian Orientalist Bongard Levin, “Hinduism and Buddhism that originated in India, and other religious and philosophical teachings which evolved on this foundation, were to influence not merely the development of many Eastern civilisations, but also social thought in many other parts of the world”(Antonova, et al, 1979, p.7).

It is noteworthy to highlight the visit of Russian trader Afanasy Nikitin, who visited India between 1466 to 1472 and wrote his travelogue account *A Voyage Beyond Three Seas* (Dash, 2002). Fascinated by the language of Sanskrit, many scholars from Russia visited India. In this regard, it is worth mentioning the visit of Gerasim Lebedev, a musician by profession. He came to India in 1875 and visited both the major cities Madras (Chennai) and Kolkata. In Chennai, he learned music, and in Kolkata, he started learning both Sanskrit and Bengali. At the same time, he also conducted theatre workshops for the local artists of Kolkata (Barannikov, 1945, pp. 315-316). Before Lebedev in St. Petersburg, Russian Scholar Bayer learned Sanskrit from an Indian Businessman and wrote a Russian text on Sanskrit titled *Literature Brahmanica* between 1732 and 1735. Even in the literary writings of Russia, Indian traders and merchants are prominently featured. For instance, the Russian folk epic *Bylini* mentions an Indian trader. Also, another Russian opera, *Sadko*, by Rimsky-Korsakov, mentions “Indian Guests (merchants)”. This reflects the nature of India and Russia’s cultural relations (Baranikov, 1945, pp. 315-316). The cultural relations between India and Russia made further progress when Indology Departments were established in all the major universities of Russia in the 17th century. The translation of the holy *Bhagwat Gita* into Russian in 1788, along with other holy religious texts like Ramayana and Mahabharat in the late 17th and 18th centuries, reflected the deep respect for Indian culture by the Russian Tsarist rulers (Petrova, 2013). It is not only through the literary front that India and Russia’s relations flourished, but it can also be observed that trade relations between the two countries have also strengthened over the years.

Studies suggest that most trade with Russia took place from India through land routes. However, after the 16th century, the Portuguese merchants lost their dominance over the Persian Gulf, which propelled the Indian merchants to trade with Russia through Iran. When Indian traders started direct trading with Russia through the sea route, it reduced the dependency of the Russians, who used to purchase Indian

products through the British traders operating in Iran. In 1635, the Russian Embassy located in Iran made special arrangements to purchase Indian goods. Over a period, some of the Russian cities like Kazan, Astrakhan, and Moscow became the hubs of Indian traders (Gopal, 1966).

With the growing influx of Indian merchants to Russia because of the favorable trading environment, many Indian merchants settled in Astrakhan. Subsequently, these Indian merchants took Russian citizenship and carried out their trading activities with the active support of the Tsarist rulers of Russia. The same can be substantiated by the fact that Peter the Great provided all sorts of protection to the Indian trading community and also to the sacred Hindu temple located there. In 1693, the Russian government also constructed a special market for the Indian community at Astrakhan (Petrova, 2013, p.100; Gopal, 1966, p.466). Along with Astrakhan, Orenburg, another Russian town was the destination point for Indian merchants (Wanner, 2013, p.36). During the Catherine II regime, attempts were also made to develop a sea trading route from Russia to India. At that time, Mikhail Vasilyevich Lomonosov, a famous scientist from Russia, unveiled a new plan connecting India through Siberia titled *The Letter about a Northern Route to East India by the Siberian Ocean*. A Russian Naval fleet was commissioned to trade with India through the Northern Sea route. Similarly, the Tsarist authority dispatched Russian Naval officers to London to study the trading pattern of the East India Company in India (Wanner, 2013, pp.40-41). During that time, a Russian Prince, Alexis Soltykoff, visited India in 1841-1843 and subsequently in 1844-46. He penned two volumes about India. Soltykoff visited several Indian cities like Vellore, Chennai, Kanchipuram, and Travancore (Thiruvananthapuram). In his memoirs, he wrote that people are “so hard-working, so gentle, working as one like brothers, happy in their work” (Walding, Stone and Nair, 2009, pp. 45-46). Efforts to augment India-Russia trade relations were heightened during the time of Tsarist Emperor Nicholas II. In 1900, he ordered the extension of the Orenburg-Tashkent railway project to India for trading activities. However, it also has its military logic (Budhwar, 2007, p 53). During Nicholas II’s term, the Russian Administration established two consulates to strengthen bilateral trade with India, one in Mumbai and the other in Kolkata in the years 1900 and 1910 (Lavrov, 2007).

On the cultural front also, the writings and speeches of Shri Ramakrishna Paramhans and Swami Vivekananda appealed to the Russian mind. As studies suggest, some of the writings of Swami Vivekananda, which were translated into Russian, influenced even Leo Tolstoy, the great Russian savant (Tathagatananda,2012). Tolstoy, after going through the writing of Vivekananda, wrote, “The reading of such books is more than a pleasure; it is broadening of a soul”. It may be recalled here that Swami Vivekananda had a deep appreciation for the Russian people also. In 1895, he stated, “The Russians, moreover, were a deeply religious people, imbued with mysticism and without prejudice towards India” (Tathagatananda,2012, pp.90-91). It is also a fact that both Mahatma Gandhi and Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore took a keen interest in the development of Russia. The correspondence between Gandhi and Tolstoy sheds much light on contemporary politics that prevailed during that period and the importance of peace and Non-Violence. Tolstoy wrote a letter to Gandhi titled “A Letter to a Hindu”, in which he appreciated India’s rich culture (Guseynov 2020, pp. 243-244). Similarly, Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, who visited Russia after the formation of the Soviet Union in 1930, vividly portrays it in a book titled *Letters from Russia (Rashiar Chithi)* (Tagore, 1960). Even the first Prime Minister of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, was an admirer of the Soviet Union. Even before India’s independence in 1947, Nehru predicted that “Russia a powerful neighbor, which may be friendly to us and cooperate with us, or maybe a thorn in our side. In either event, we have to know her and understand her and shape our policy accordingly” (Stein, 1969, p.17).

The above statement of Pandit Nehru demonstrates his importance in strengthening relations with the Soviet Union. One may add here that the warmth in the civilizational relations between the two countries provided the base for India and the Soviet Union’s relations. At the same time, India’s relations with the Soviet Union provided an alternative to the Global order during the Cold War period.

Post-1947 Phase and Cold War Geopolitics

India’s relations with the Soviet Union took a new turn in the post-1947 phase. The first Prime Minister of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, visited the Soviet Union in 1955, which resulted in the signing of a series of agreements between the two countries. The Soviet Union’s assistance in the development sectors was crucial. The same

materialized during the then-Prime Minister Nehru's visit to the Soviet Union. During his visit to Moscow, Jawaharlal Nehru stated, "Let our coming together be because we like each other and we wish to cooperate and not because we dislike others or wish to do them injury" (Gupta, 1963, p.144). This statement of Pandit Nehru can be understood in the context of Cold War geopolitics (NATO and Warsaw blocs rivalry) prevalent at that period. The visit also strengthened relations between India and the Soviet Union. It is a matter of fact that whenever India required support at international forums, like at the United Nations (UN), the Soviet Union supported (Gupta, 1963, p.144). Thus, the Soviet Union emerged as a trustworthy ally of India at the height of the Cold War. It was not only at the international forums but also at the bilateral fronts that the relationship was more stable. The same was reflected during the India-Pakistan war in 1971, which led to the creation of present-day Bangladesh. During the war, the Soviet Union ventured into its advanced nuclear submarines to checkmate the US Administration's planned move to deploy its Seventh Fleet in the Bay of Bengal to provide covert support to Pakistan (Sputnik News, 2023).

Soviet deployment of its warships can be understood in the context of the Indo-Soviet Treaty signed in August 1971 titled "Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation Between the Government of India and the Government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics". Article 9 of the treaty underlines that "In the event of either Party being subjected to an attack or a threat thereof, the High Contracting Parties shall immediately enter into mutual consultations to remove such threat and to take appropriate, effective measures to ensure peace and the security of their countries" (Mid.Ru, 2023).

It is not only in the defense sphere, but both India and the Soviet Union strengthened their bilateral trade and economic relations. A major factor promoting stronger bilateral trade relations was the nature of the rupee-ruble trade, which provided a healthy trade partnership. Similarly, the Soviet Union also supplied defense equipment and other machinery necessary to India. India also supplied food grains when the Soviet Union faced the worst crisis in the 1980s (Thakur,1991; Gididhubli,2001).

Along with deep-rooted historical-cultural relations between India and the Soviet Union, one can certainly add here that the geopolitical development that took place during the Cold War period certainly

shaped the relations. For instance, India's leadership of the Non-Aligned Movement forced the Soviet leadership to reorient their relations with it. Similarly, the Soviet desire to contain China also propelled it to have engagement with India. China emerged as a major threat to both India and the Soviet Union in the 1960s. The other major external geopolitical factor that motivated the Soviet leadership to consolidate ties with India was the US factor. The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan pushed the US to involve itself more aggressively in South Asian geopolitics. This also contributed to the growing US-Pakistan military engagement, which threatened South. In this context, the deepening of India-Soviet Union ties can be understandable (Mastney, 2010; Donaldson, 1972). One may recall here that when a resolution was adopted against the Soviet Union in 1979 in the UN General Assembly for its involvement in Afghanistan, India took a "neutral" position (Ganguli, 2024, p.61). Some of these factors, to a great extent, shaped India-Soviet ties during the Cold War period. Thus, a closer look at India-Russia relations from a historical perspective demonstrates four important trajectories. These are:

- a) The geo-cultural vector is one of the strongest foundations that bind India and Russia relations.
- b) During the Cold War period, the relations took the shape of a more pragmatic engagement between both countries.
- c) The economic engagement, especially the transfer of technology-facilitated robustness in bilateral economic engagement.
- d) A common perception of some of the global issues also strengthened the bilateral ties.

Some of these historical factors, as discussed above, provide the basis for building India-Russia relations in the years to come.

Post-Cold War phase of Mutual Apprehension

The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 paved the way for a new world order dominated by the United States. Russia, being the successor state of the Soviet Union, tried to outline its foreign policy, keeping its pragmatic interests. Then, Russia also faced a considerable economic crisis, and the Boris Yeltsin Administration looked towards the West for economic assistance. The pro-West orientation of the Yeltsin Administration in the post-1991 era can be understood in this context (Kozyrov, 1992). However, despite his pro-West leaning,

President Boris Yeltsin visited India in January 1993. The visit resolved the long-standing dispute over the rupee-rouble trade. At the same time, an “Agreement on Friendship and Cooperation” between the two countries was also signed. This Agreement replaced the Indo-Soviet Treaty of 1971 as the basis of bilateral relations (LA Times, 1993). One may recall here that Russia faced the worst form of economic crisis then, so India has also adopted a more liberalized economy during the same period. In this context, the bilateral relations between the two countries can be looked at. Despite initial hiccups, one can notice that the Yeltsin Administration kept its promise of supplying military equipment (Jain, 2025).

Russian foreign policy underwent a sharp change in the post-1995 phase under the leadership of Yevgeny Primakov, who gave a new orientation to Russian foreign policy. Primakov understood the intricacies of Russia’s interaction with the West, led by the United States, and, at the same time, NATO’s Eastward expansion, which posed a substantial challenge to Russia’s security. The expansionist tendency on the part of the US in the former Soviet space further alarmed Russian policymakers. In this context, Russia looked towards Asian countries as an alternative for strategic engagement. He called for a strategic triangle involving India, Russia, and China to usher in a new multipolar world order (Rudnitsky, 1999; Kuchins, 2001; Mohanty, 2010). Prioritizing India as a major vector in Russia’s foreign policy, Primakov visited India in December 1998. During his visit, efforts were made to augment economic cooperation to a new level, as well as scientific cooperation and military and defense cooperation. Agreements were signed between India and Russia on some of these aspects during Primakov’s visit to India (Indian Embassy, USA, 1998).

India-Russia relations in the post-1991 era demonstrate that there has been continuity in the bilateral relationship despite changes in the global geopolitical structure. At the same time, some degree of apprehension can also be noticed in the bilateral relations between the two countries. This is because of the declining position of Russia (the successor of the erstwhile Soviet Union) in global geopolitics. Russia looked towards the West for assistance (Mohanty, 2010; Kuchins, 2001). One needs to mention here that despite these hindrances, the foundation for building a more robust partnership between the two countries took place during this period.

Post-2000 Era and Consolidation of Strategic Partnership

When President Vladimir Putin took over as President of Russia, under his leadership, Russia continued Primakov's policy and strengthened relations with Asian countries, particularly with India. The same was reflected in the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation enunciated in June 2000. The Foreign Policy Concept of 2000 highlighted that "Russia intends to strengthen its traditional partnership with India, including in international affairs, and to aid in overcoming problems persisting in South Asia and strengthen stability in the region" (The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, 2000). This reflects the importance Russia gave to India in its strategic interaction under the leadership of President Vladimir Putin. The subsequent visit of President Putin to India in October 2000 heralded a new era in bilateral relations. The visit can be understood in the context of the elevation of the relationship between the two countries into a strategic one. The Joint Declaration is titled "Declaration of Strategic Partnership between the Republic of India and the Republic of Russia" (MEA, 2000). A closer look at the provisions of the Declaration of the Strategic Partnership reflects that it provides a comprehensive framework for cooperation between both countries, ranging from economic, energy, scientific and technological, and cultural to defense, etc. The Joint Declaration also called for the need for a multi-polar world order (MEA, 2000).

The visit of Putin to India was followed by the return visit of then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee to Russia in October 2001, which resulted in the signing of the Joint Declaration between India and Russia. During the visit, Vajpayee underlined "the time-tested relationship between India and the Russian Federation, which has been marked by continuity, trust and mutual understanding" (PIB, 2001). Like the Cold War period, even in the post-Cold War period, Russia supported India when the US imposed certain sanctions in the aftermath of the Pokhran nuclear test carried out by India in 1999. Similarly, it also supported the building of the Kudankulam nuclear power plant in India (Zakharov, 2019). The signing of the Civil-Nuclear Agreement with Russia in 2011 gave India an edge in harnessing the civilian use of nuclear energy. Both countries signed an agreement in this regard when the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Russia in December 2011 (MEA, 2011). Civilian nuclear cooperation is one niche area of cooperation between the two countries. Russia has agreed

to construct 12 nuclear reactors in India as per the agreement. (MEA, 2011). Efforts to further strengthen the bilateral civilian nuclear cooperation were boosted when Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Moscow in July 2024. The Joint Statement signed by both India and Russia highlighted that “cooperation in the peaceful uses of nuclear energy as a significant component of the strategic partnership” (MEA, 2024).

India’s support to Russia during the Crimea crisis of 2014 has also reflected the strong bond of cooperation between the two countries. When there was criticism of Russia globally, India underlined that Russia has “legitimate interests” in Crimea. At the same time, India refused to endorse the sanctions imposed by Western countries on Russia (Times of India, 2014).

The election of Prime Minister Narendra Modi as Prime Minister of India in May 2014 further strengthened the bilateral relations with Russia. The same can be testified from the visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Russia in December 2015. The visit of Prime Minister Modi to Russia reaffirmed the strong ties between the two countries. Prime Minister Modi, in his address at Moscow, underscored the special character of the relationship between the two countries. As stated by Prime Minister Modi, “I have always had great respect and appreciation for our strategic partnership. It has been a source of strength and success for India in defense, development, and diplomacy. And, there is genuine goodwill and mutual respect between our people” (MEA, 2015).

Russia also supported India’s full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 2017 and this is despite the objection being raised by China (Tass, 2016). Though Russia has its strategic compulsion of balancing China in the SCO Forum (Mohapatra, 2022a). Russian President Putin stated, “This will provide us with an opportunity for closer work with our Indian friends, now on the floor of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization” (Tass, 2016; Grossman, 2017). One may add here that Russia is quite apprehensive of China’s strategic move in Central Asia as well as Afghanistan. The same can be inferred from the statement of President Putin welcoming India’s permanent membership in the SCO (Mohapatra, 2022a).

One major development in the India-Russia relationship is the further institutionalization of the bilateral relationship between the two countries. India has a similar arrangement with the US also. This

2+2 dialogue between the defense and foreign ministers, which has been taking place in both countries since December 2021, is giving a new impetus to bilateral relations. One may recall that India also has a similar arrangement with the US (MEA, 2021).

In the aftermath of the barbaric terror attack in Pahalgam (located in the Indian Union territory of Jammu and Kashmir) on 22 April 2025, committed by the Pakistan-sponsored Resistant Front (TRF) terrorists, part of banned terror group Lashkar-e-Taiba, which led to the death of 26 innocent civilians, Russian President Putin expressed his deep concerns (DD News, 2025; Kumar, 2025; Deccan Herald, 2025; Business Standard, 2025). In a letter addressed to both the President of India, Draupadi Murmu, and the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, Putin stated that “This brutal crime cannot be justified. We trust that its organizers and perpetrators will receive the punishment they deserve. I would like to reiterate our readiness to further step up interaction with our Indian partners in the fight against all forms and manifestations of terrorism” (Kremlin.Ru 2025).

A closer look at the relationship between both countries demonstrates that despite facing initial hiccups, relations between India and Russia improved to a great extent in the post-1991 phase. In this context, there is a need for a comprehensive explanation of the basis of India-Russia bilateral relations, as well as the global geopolitical developments that have shaped bilateral relations to a great extent. The same can be examined through various prisms.

Afghanistan Crisis and Central Asian Security Concerns

One major external factor bringing India and Russia's relations closer is the Afghanistan crisis and its ramifications on Central Asia. It is a fact that both India and Russia have concerns about the strategic stability of Afghanistan and Central Asia. Since the beginning of the 1990s, both India and Russia have had a common position since the beginning of the Afghanistan crisis in the mid-1990s. New Delhi and Moscow believe that the only way to resolve the conflict in Afghanistan is non-intervention from external powers. At the same time, both New Delhi and Moscow emphasized respecting the “territorial integrity, independence and sovereignty of Afghanistan” (MEA, 2001). During the visit of then Prime Minister Vajpayee to Russia, both countries signed a “Declaration to Combat International Terrorism” (MEA, 2001). Understanding the security concerns emanating from Afghanistan post-

2001, the India-Russia Joint Working Group on Afghanistan was formed. The 5th session of the Joint Working Group in a Joint Statement in July 2002 underlined “the UN contribution to mobilizing international humanitarian aid and establishing the new administrative institutions in Afghanistan” (MEA 2002). The Joint Working Group also “stressed the need for Pakistan to fulfil its stated commitment to end cross-border terrorism and extremism” (MEA 2002).

In fact, just after the exit of the democratically elected Ashraf government and the return of chaos to Afghanistan, both countries advocated the need for a strong and independent Afghanistan. One of the core concerns of both India and Russia is preventing the spillover effect of the Afghan conflict to Central Asia. It is a fact that political instability, as well as the growth of Islamist extremism and terrorism in Central Asia, posed a substantial challenge to regional security. The political fluidity in Afghanistan and both covert and overt support being provided by Pakistan over the years has contributed to the proliferation of radical and terrorist groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Hizb ut -Tahrir al -Islami, Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP) an affiliated group of dreaded terrorist group ISIS in Central Asia. Over time, Central Asia became a hotbed of Islamist militancy and became a gateway for the illicit transportation of narcotic substances to Russia. Some of these illicit activities also pose a strong threat to the political stability of Central Asia. It may be noted that some of these terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan and Central Asia also pose a serious threat to both India and Russia’s security (Valerevna, 2009; Mohapatra, 2020; Mohapatra, 2024).

It is a fact that Afghanistan’s political uncertainty is a cause of concern for both India and Russia. Soon after the ouster of the Ashraf Ghani government, Indian National Security Advisor Ajit Doval and his Russian counterpart Nikolay Patrushev discussed the security concerns of both countries because of the political flux in Afghanistan. They also discussed the measures to counter security threats to Central Asia (Gupta, 2021). During the visit of Prime Minister Modi to Russia in July 2024, he discussed the security situation in Afghanistan with his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin. The Joint Declaration issued after the Summit “welcomed the counter-terrorism measures against international terrorist groups, including in particular ISIS, and other groups and expressed confidence that the fight against terrorism in Afghanistan would be comprehensive and effective.” (MEA, 2024). Along with ensuring the security and stability of Afghanistan, both

India and Russia are concerned with the peace, security, and development of Central Asia. Multiple factors propel India and Russia to cooperate in Central Asia. The first factor is enhancing connectivity in this region through the Chahbahar connectivity project, as well also the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), boosting cooperation in the energy sector, which also includes renewable energy, ensuring the region's sustainable development in the sphere of technological cooperation. Even in the health sector also India and Russia can cooperate in Central Asia. Cooperation in the sphere of critical technology in the Central Asian region can also be considered by India and Russia (Foshko, 2012; Mohapatra, 2024 b). The greater cooperation between India and Russia in Central Asia is necessary to protect Central Asian countries from Chinese expansionist tendencies in this part of the world (Mohapatra, 2024 b).

Needless to say, despite the external factors playing a critical role in influencing India-Russia relations over the years, economic factors and connectivity issues have also shaped bilateral relations.

Geo-Economic Cooperation and Regional Connectivity Issues

India and Russia's relations over the years have assumed an important dimension in the context of geo-economic relations and regional-economic connectivity over the years. What is important to underline here is that despite having a mature geopolitical engagement between both countries, the same has not been translated into trade relations. For instance, while India's trade with China, the US, and the European Union was on the much higher side over a longer period, the same was not true with Russia. As per statistics in 2023-24, the bilateral trade between both countries was 65.7 billion US Dollars. On the other hand, the trade between the two countries was a mere 1-5 billion US Dollars in 1995. Similarly, in 2021, India-Russia bilateral trade was 13.2 billion US Dollars (MEA, 2022). However, if one compares India's trade with the US, EU, and even China, the trade figures are far below. For instance, in 2021, India's trade with the US 2024 was 129.9 US Dollars, with the European Union 137. 41 billion dollars in 2023-24, and with China for the year 2024, the figure stood at 118.4 billion US Dollars (India Trade Summary; PIB, 2024; GTRI, 2024). One may recall here that India-Russia stood at a paltry 5.41 billion US Dollars in 2015 (MEA 2024a; Brief on India-Russia Economic Relations, 2025).

Some of the above statistical figures demonstrate that low trade is a key concern for India-Russia relations. In this context, it needs to be underlined here that the bilateral trade relations between the two countries have not moved beyond the traditional areas like India exporting pharmaceutical products, coffee, tea, electrical machinery, iron, and steel, etc., and importing from Russia, namely fertilizers, energy including energy, project goods, defense-related products, etc. (Gidadhubli, 2001; Statistics for India's Trade with Russian Federation, 2025).

It is important to understand that new bilateral trade sectors between the two countries should be identified. This will rejuvenate trade relations between India and Russia. Though institutional mechanisms are in place to augment trade ties between the two countries, it is an area of concern for both countries. Though the trade figure in 2024 reached a staggering high, as the figure demonstrates, it is largely in the aftermath of the Russia-Ukraine war. Russia chose to export its energy in bulk to India. This is largely due to the diversion of energy supplies from Europe to Asia (Paul, 2023).

The surge in bilateral trade provides hope for robust economic relations between India and Russia. As discussed above, the emergence of institutional mechanisms is a key driver for the present robustness of bilateral relations. Some of them are the India-Russia Inter-governmental Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific, Technological and Cultural Cooperation (IRIGC-TEC) and India-Russia Strategic Economic Dialogue. India is also a regular participant in the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum and Eastern Economic Forum held at Vladivostok. Some of these institutional mechanisms, as discussed, provide a framework for trade cooperation between the two countries (MEA, 2024a).

One major trade strategy launched by India, which aims to boost trade with the strategically important Far Eastern region, is the Act Far East Strategy. This Strategic doctrine was unveiled by Prime Minister Modi during his visit to Vladivostok in September 2019 to attend the Eastern Economic Forum. In his address, Prime Minister Modi stated, "Today's announcement will prove to be the take-off point of the Act Far East policy, and it is my firm belief that this step adds a new dimension to our economic diplomacy" (PIB, 2019). In the same address, Prime Minister Modi announced a 1-billion-dollar credit line to Russia to develop the Far Eastern part of Russia (PIB,

2019a). Along with offering a line of credit, India also signed two major agreements with Russia in 2024 to develop the Far Eastern region of Russia. These are: “Program of India-Russia cooperation in trade, economic and investment spheres in the Russian Far East for the period from 2024 to 2029” and also the “cooperation principles in the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation”. Some of these developments can be considered catalysts for furthering India-Russia cooperation (PIB, 2019a).

Over the years, Russian industries have shown their interest in investing in India in a big way under the “Make in India” and “Atmanirbhar Bharat”. Similarly, Indian industries are keen to invest in Russia, which will augment the Russian economy faster (MEA, 2024).

The most important component of India-Russia geo-economic relations is the connectivity corridors. Some of these connectivity corridors that deserve attention here are the International North-South Transportation Corridor and Chennai-Vladivostok Maritime Corridor, connecting Russia’s Far East through the Indo-Pacific Corridor, which can also be connected with Kazakhstan’s energy sector. (Mohapatra, 2022, 2024b). As the Northern Sea Route is emerging as a potential route for navigation, India and Russia signed an agreement to develop the potential of this route during their visit to Russia in July 2024 (MEA, 2024). It is pertinent to mention here that both Chahbahar Port, located in Iran, and the INSTC Route are becoming the key entrepôts for India in engaging with the post-Soviet Eurasian countries. As per the latest Economic Survey Report of the Government of India, India’s trade with the above post-Soviet Eurasian countries increased by “43 percent increase in vessel traffic and a 34 percent rise in container traffic for FY24” (Economic Survey of India, 2025). Another heartening aspect of India-Russia trade connectivity through INSTC is that there is a surge in India-Russian trade through the all-weather Makhachkala port located in the Dagestan region (located in the vicinity of the Caspian Sea) of Russia. The port has been connected to India through Iran. Already, Cement and fertilizers from Belarus are exported to India using the Makhachkala port through Iran (Interfax, 2024). Along with Makhachkala, the Bandar Abbas port of Iran and the Astrakhan port of Russia are becoming the key INSTC routes for India to connect with Russia. It has also been argued that by opening the trading route, India and Russia’s trade can move at a faster pace

(Portnews, 2025). In recent years, Armenia has also emerged as another alternative route for India to connect with Russia through Iran and Georgia. This will help India to reach out to the strategically important Black Sea region and also to Russia. All these developments will facilitate greater trade and connectivity between India and Russia. (Mohapatra, 2022).

The operationalization of the Chennai Vladivostok Maritime Connectivity corridor is adding new substance to India-Russia relations. The operationalization of this corridor will facilitate the movement of Russian energy, including coal, to India through the maritime corridor. In addition, this maritime corridor is shortening the distance between India and Russia and takes only 15 days, as studies suggest, and will also help India to strategies its economic cooperation with the Northeast Asian countries (The Hindu Business Line, 2024). The port of Sabetta in Russia, which is located near the Pacific, can also be connected with India through the Indo-Pacific corridor. Interestingly, Sabetta is also linked with Kazakhstan through two major rivers, namely the Ob and the Irtysh. These two rivers also transport Kazakh energy to this port, which is transported to South Korea and Japan. Thus, connecting with the port of Sabetta, India, can also strengthen energy trade with Kazakhstan (Mohapatra, 2022).

The trade relations between the two countries will flourish in the forthcoming years as one major hindrance to trade will be addressed with the emergence of operational connectivity routes. This boosts India's trade with Russia. Another major issue that needs to be addressed by Russian policymakers is the inclusion of India in the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). There is a complementarity of interest between India and Russia as far as mutual free trade is concerned. Similarly, by offering India membership in the EEU, Russia can also checkmate the preponderance of China in the post-Soviet Eurasian space (Sen, 2024).

A closer look at the bilateral trade relations shows that there is a growing surge in the trade between India and Russia. At the same time, both countries are also diversifying trade relations into various sectors, which is adding an impetus to trade cooperation and providing a common perspective on global issues.

Issues of Multipolarity, Global Order, and Geopolitics

The core issue that brings India and Russia on a common platform is that both countries have a similar view on an equitable world order

and multipolarity. Over the years, Russia strongly supported India's case for permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council. One may add here that the rise of Russia's approach to multilateral institutions was in sync with its rising global profile in the post-2000 phase. The basic postulate of Russia's approach to multilateralism is that a "multi-polar world is a direct and unequivocal alternative to globalization" (Makarychev and Morozov, 2011, p.361). In this regard, it is pertinent to highlight here that the roots of Russia's approach to multilateralism were outlined by Russia's Foreign Policy Concept 2000. The basic postulate of this foreign policy concept was "a multi-polar system of international relations that would genuinely reflect the diversity of the contemporary world with its varied interests". The foreign policy concept in the context of engagement of international institutions highlights that "to promote the development of the national economy, which at a time of globalization is unthinkable without Russia's large-scale integration in the system of world economic ties" (The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, 2000).

There are two contrasting approaches concerning Russia and the Western approach to multilateral institutions. While the Western approach focuses on the "enforcement of international law", on the other hand, Russia believes that "collective leadership of leading states which objectively bear special responsibility for the state of world affairs" (Zagorski, 2010, p.33). At the same time, Russian policymakers have also emphasized that "break the American monopoly on breaking international law" (Gabuev and Cherneko, 2019). This issue of multipolarity has gained a sense of urgency in the context of growing criticism of Russia by the Western powers over Russia's war with Georgia over South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Similarly, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 further isolated Russia from international bodies. With this issue, Moscow also started criticizing the West's Responsibility to Protect (R2P) policy (Dagi, 2020).

India's approach to multilateralism and global order is rooted in the age-old principle of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam", which means "the world is one family" and is the cornerstone of India's foreign policy. Another important traditional Indian principle that shapes India's foreign policy is the traditional Buddhist policy of "Madhyam Marg," the Middle Path (PMI, New York; Mohapatra, 2023). Some of these aspects were reflected in the policy paper outlined by the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, in 2022. The major policy with

regards to multilateralism as outlined in the policy paper are: “(1) Samman (Respect); (2) Sambvad (Dialogue); (3) Sahyog (Cooperation); (4) Shanti (Peace) (5) Samriddhi (Prosperity)” (PMI, New York; Mohapatra, 2023). These five principles, as outlined in the policy paper, provide the basis for India’s approach to global order. India believes in democratizing international relations and giving the Global South countries a voice. At the same time, India also opposes the policy of R2P, which the West has employed selectively to promote its geopolitical agenda by toppling a democratically elected government. By selectively employing R2P, Western countries are trying to impede the rules-based world order (PMI, New York, 2012; Mohapatra, 2023). In 2011, when the United Nations brought out a resolution on armed intervention in Libya, India and Russia abstained from voting, thus marking their opposition to the UN resolution (Times of India, 2011; MEA, 2011a).

In this context, India emphasizes the creation of a rules-based world order. As stated by Prime Minister Modi, in his address to the India-ASEAN Summit in September 2023, “It will be mutually beneficial for all of us to develop a rules-based post-COVID world order as well as efforts by all (Sabka Prayas) for human welfare” (ND TV, 2023). Similarly, India’s foreign policy plank was rooted in the principle of “equidistance” from the two Superpowers, namely the USA and the former Soviet Union, as reflected in the Non-Aligned policy during the Cold War era. On the other hand, India has emphasized the principle of “multi-alignment” in recent years, which means aligning with all the major powers, be it Russia, the US, or the European Union (Raja Mohan, 2019; Hall, 2016). The policy of “multi-alignment” helped India play a more assertive role in the Russian-Ukraine war. Both Russian President Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy appreciate India’s role in defusing the crisis (Mohapatra, 2024a). India’s position on the Russia-Ukraine war has been best explained by Prime Minister Modi as he underlined that “India is not neutral. India is siding with peace. I have already said to President Putin that this is not the era of war” (ND TV, 2025).

The multi-alignment policy can be reflected in India’s foreign policy postures over the years. India is a member of the Strategic Quad as part of the Indo-Pacific Security architecture, though Russia opposes it (Mohapatra, 2022). At the same time, India is also part of the SCO and BRICS, where Russia is an important player. India

underlines that by engaging with both the US and Russia on equal footing, demonstrating its age-old principle of strategic autonomy as well as the policy of multi-alignment (Mohapatra, 2022; Kugelman, 2024). From the above policy postures, it can be stated that India stood for a genuine multipolarity and a world order based on equity, and where the voice of the Global South counts. The same has been expressed by India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, who questioned the present world order by calling it a "Myth" (India Today, 2025).

Examination of both Indian and Russian positions on the global order reflects more or less on the global order. Both India and Russia object to the present West-centric hegemonic world order. The same was expressed by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in a speech where he emphasized that "Moscow and New Delhi share close or even converging views on the emergence of a multipolar world order". In the same speech, Lavrov also appreciated India's foreign policy goals, where he highlighted that "We share India's foreign policy concept with its slogan "The world is one family". It stands for promoting international cooperation for improving the well-being of the entire humankind by balancing the interests of all countries" (Mid. Ru, 2025).

On multifaceted global issues, both India and Russia have a common perception. These are restructuring the U.N and other multilateral bodies, which will take into the aspirations of the global community in the post-Cold War era, opposing the Western notion of R2P, a more equitable global economic order, and also removing barriers to accessing technology which will benefit all the countries, an alternative perspective on democracy, etc. All these developments are going to shape a stronger and viable multipolar world order. One may recall here that when Prime Minister Modi visited Russia in July 2024, there was criticism from the then-Biden Administration's hawkish high official, Donald Lu. But India defended the visit as "freedom of choice" (Deccan Herald, 2024). It may be recalled here that at the 22nd India-Russia Annual Summit, Prime Minister Modi also gave a call for "building a multipolar world order and strengthening the position of developing countries in global affairs". The Summit also emphasized "the formation of a sustainable and multipolar world order" (MEA, 2024).

It is expected that with the election of President Donald Trump as President of the US, a new form of global realignment will take

place in global geopolitics. His rapprochement with President Putin will contribute to the easing of the Russia-Ukraine war. At the same time, there will be a marked improvement in the Russia-US relations. The same can be inferred from looking at the trade and tariff war between the US and China, as well as new posturing between the US and EU, which will provide an opportunity for the US to re-engage with Russia. This will provide much-needed peace to global geopolitics. It is in this context that one can sense a more positive global order. The realignment in the global geopolitical order will provide India with an opportunity to balance both the US and Russia. This is because India has good relations with both the US and Russia. Hence, one can envisage the emergence of a new strategic triangle involving India, Russia, and the US (Mohapatra, 2024c).

From the above analysis, it is clear that both India and Russia are taking a significant leap in establishing a multipolar world order. However, despite the consensus, certain key issues evoke divergent perspectives from both countries. Russia has a quite sceptical approach towards the strategic Quad. On the other hand, India is very much part of this regional security organization, which is essential to maintaining regional stability in the Indo-Pacific region and checkmating Chinese hegemonization (Mohapatra, 2022). Similarly, there was a near consensus for the BRICS Summit, which took place in Kazan, in October 2024, talking about a common currency for the BRICS countries. On the other hand, India has taken a different position and does not want de-dollarization at the present moment (Sheth, 2024). Another concern is Russia's engagement with China and Pakistan in recent years. This Russian move is generating some degree of apprehension from India (Mohapatra, 2022).

It may be underlined that despite these differences, India and Russia relations are on the upswing, thus giving a new dimension to regional and global geopolitics. One of the factors that adds vibrancy to the two countries' relations is the historical continuity of the civilizational relations.

Conclusion

One factor that adds substance to India-Russia relations is the civilizational dimension. Civilizational relations have provided continuity to the relations since ancient times. A closer look at the religious as well as linguistic commonness between the two countries

demonstrates that Hinduism as well as Sanskrit are the two elements that shaped India's relations with Russia. Since the "Aryan Invasion theory (AIT)" has largely been discredited because of new genetic studies, and the "Out of India theory (OIT)" is gaining wider acceptance, it can be underlined that India's geo-cultural sphere of influence extended up to Russia's Siberia and the Arctic in ancient times. As discussed above, the same can be substantiated by India's holy religious textbooks. Along with Hindu religious texts, Buddhism has also shaped the relations with Russia. Even today, the Tantric cult of Buddhism, widely prevalent in India, is also observed in Russia. What is important to add here is that Indian cultural practices have mingled well with the local cultural practices of Russia. This adds vibrancy to India-Russia relations over the centuries. As discussed above, the Tsarist rulers of Russia took great interest in Indian culture, which can be observed in translating the holy Hindu religious text of the Bhagavat Gita into Russian. This demonstrates the geo-cultural continuity of relations between India and Russia. Thus, the civilizational relations between India and Russia provide the basis for understanding current bilateral relations.

Even during the Cold War phase, despite India's policy of non-alignment, the relations between India and Russia (former Soviet Union) remained strong. Soviet policymakers acknowledged India's role in global geopolitics. It is a fact that the Soviet Union supported India, whether at the UN or during the war with Pakistan, both in 1965 and 1971. Similarly, Soviet assistance in the construction of heavy industries and transferred technology during the Cold War period is worth mentioning.

In the post-1991 phase, one can also notice a surge in bilateral relations. This is even though Russia reoriented its relations with the West. President Yeltsin's and later Primakov's visit to India reflected trust between the two countries. The reorientation of Russia's relations with India can be understood from the major structural developments that took place at the global level. These include: the growing isolation of Russia in global geopolitics following the series of setbacks it received from Western countries. NATO's Eastward expansion, as well as the Kosovo crisis, alarmed Russian policymakers. This propelled Russia to engage with its traditional strategic ally, India. It may be recalled here that India was also under sanctions from the US Administration for testing nuclear weapons in 1998. In that context,

both India and Russia forged a greater cooperation to usher in a multipolar world order. The post-2001 era marked a new phase in the relations between India and Russia. The emergence of Putin as President of Russia gave a new impetus to India-Russia relations. Unlike Yeltsin, President Putin realized the folly of aligning with the West and started looking towards India as a major strategic partner. Thus, one can notice a common approach between India and Russia on global issues, whether on bringing stability in Afghanistan or opposing a number of Western resolutions, like on the question of R2P, at the UN. Both countries also took steps to create a new multipolar world order. India's covert support to Russia during the Crimea crisis in 2014 demonstrates closer cooperation between both countries.

The relations between India and Russia further strengthened when Prime Minister Modi became Prime Minister of India in May 2014. The visit gave new vistas to bilateral cooperation in different areas, ranging from economic to technological, as well as scientific so also connectivity issues. It may be noted that the INSTC project will give a greater impetus to boosting the bilateral cooperation between the two countries. Another notable achievement of the connectivity project is the operationalization of the Chennai-Vladivostok maritime corridor, which will give impetus to India's economic diplomacy in the Siberia and Far East region of Russia. Similarly, by using the Vladivostok port, India can also strategize geo-economic diplomacy in the Northeast Asian region. By participating in the Far Eastern Economic Forum, Indian industries have entered the resource sectors like oil and gas in this part of Russia. It is a fact that over the years, India has played an important role in checkmating China's overture in this part of Russia. Similarly, the Indo-Pacific corridor can also be linked with the Siberian and Far East parts of Russia. This, to a substantial extent, facilitates the movement of Russian energy into India through the Indo-Pacific corridor. Similarly, India's participation in the Northern Sea Corridor will give a greater impetus to both India's geopolitical and geo-economic diplomacy.

Another important dimension of India-Russia relations is that the trade relations between the two countries are diversified. New areas of cooperation, like joint ventures on critical technology and nuclear energy, are identified by India and Russia. Similarly, Russia is also participating in emerging as an important investor in India's economy. At the same time, in the aftermath of the Russia-Ukraine war, Russia

is keen to tap the Indian market. As a result, trade between both countries has soared in recent years. Similarly, Russia is keen on India's participation in the EEU. BRICS is another major institutional forum in which India and Russia are cooperating.

The most important aspect of India and Russia relations is that despite the complexity and challenges the global order faces, there is a steadfast interaction between both countries. While India appreciates Russia's Multi-Vector foreign policy, similarly, Russia also reciprocates India's multi-alignment foreign policy. A key factor that brings both countries' relationship to a new height is the "mutual trust" rooted in history. The test for India's relations with Russia came with the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war. The global community admired the position that India took. India's approach to ending the war between Russia and Ukraine was rooted in the age-old Indian philosophical doctrine of Panchsheel, which urges for "Dialogue". Russian policymakers understand the fact that though China is their strategic partner at present, looking at their historical relations, one may add here that the relations may be far from stable in the longer run. In this context, India emerges as Russia's most trustworthy strategic partner. Similarly, the global geopolitical complexities have also propelled Russia to strengthen ties with other countries. When Russia faced isolation in the post-2014 Ukrainian fiasco, India supported Russia. In the aftermath of the Russia-Ukraine war, India played a major role in resolving the dispute. It can be underlined that complex global geopolitical dynamics are shaping India-Russia relations. Similarly, on the question of Afghanistan, both India and Russia have a common position. Another aspect of India and Russia relations is that both countries share more or less a common position on democracy, human rights, R2P, reforming the UN, etc. Some of these normative elements provide a convergence point for both countries to ensure a multi-polar world order.

The global economic recession, the post-COVID world order, and a marked increase in conflict in different parts of the world pose a substantial challenge to global peace and security. In this context, relations between India and Russia are vital to ensuring global peace and order.

The following measures can be considered to boost bilateral relations between India and Russia. These are:

- 1) One of the major facets of India and Russia relations is people-to-people cultural contact. Hence, measures must be taken into account to study the rich ancient cultures of both countries.
- 2) There is a need to enhance academic cooperation, especially in the higher education sector, between India and Russia.
- 3) Technological cooperation is another area where both countries should cooperate.
- 4) Russia should facilitate the inclusion of India as a member of the EEU.
- 5) India and Russia need to develop a joint cooperation mechanism to strengthen cooperation in Russia's Arctic and Siberia regions.
- 6) Efforts to boost trade between both countries need to be considered. The same can be boosted if the trade is diversified (beyond energy and defense) into other areas like technology, outer space cooperation, nuclear medicine, etc., Russia should consider India as a priority trading partner.
- 7) Cooperation in the sphere of addressing climate change concerns, renewable energy, and sustainable development is a priority area of cooperation between both countries.
- 8) To counter the new security challenges emanating from traditional and non-traditional threats, a new Joint security cooperation mechanism should be developed between India and Russia.
- 9) Cooperation in information technology is a major area of cooperation between India and Russia.
- 10) Yoga and traditional medicines can be another area of cooperation between India and Russia. Russia will benefit immensely from the traditional Indian medicines.

To sum up, it can be added here that the civilizational basis provides the basis for building a robust partnership between India and Russia. At the same time, convergence on bilateral and regional issues so also mutual economic compulsions and a common approach to global geopolitical issues will provide the necessary thrust and substance to India and Russia relations in the 21st century.

(Footnotes)

- ¹ The same view can be substantiated by the famous Indian Anthropologist Srinivas Iyengar. To quote Iyengar, "The Aryans [in their literature] do not

refer to any foreign country as their original home, do not refer to themselves as coming from beyond India, do not name any place in India after the names of places in their original land as conquerors and colonisers do, but speak of themselves exactly as sons of the soil would do. If they had been foreign invaders, it would have been humanly impossible for all memory of such invasion to have been utterly obliterated from memory in such a short time as represents the differences between the Vedic and Avestan dialect” (as quoted in Lal, 2022).

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Changing Contour of The Indo-Pacific Geopolitical Space: India's Rejigged Indo-Pacific Strategy and The Way Ahead

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Mapping the Context

Indo-Pacific has emerged as a focal point with the advent of change in power distribution in global politics. This region brings various opportunities like trade and connectivity, access to energy resources, collaboration in maintaining maritime security, and regional cooperation, attracting major powers like the US and China to invest and compete in the region. It also poses numerous challenges, like geopolitical tension, territorial and maritime disputes. Even when there exist possibilities to grow, the cut-throat competition, new threat perceptions, mutual suspicion, and mistrust have been the highlight of the Indo-Pacific region.

At the beginning of the 21st century, when the US was embroiled in dealing with the situation resulting from the 9/11 terror attacks on it and engaged in military operations against Afghanistan and Iraq, China enlarged its strength and expanded its international influence. This was seen as a matter of concern by the US, as China now could counter the US in the global strategic space. Moreover, in China's proximate region up in the North, Japan has been putting up adequate resistance and seems neatly fixed up in the US strategic architecture of the North Pacific region; on the other, India's want of countering sweltering influence of China clinched near to the US as a strategic partner in the region rechristened as the Indo-Pacific. The need for

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such collaboration has been seen in the quest for keeping China in check and maintaining peace and stability in the region and beyond. The formation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) to ensure a “free and open Indo-Pacific” is also one of the major developments in this direction. However, Beijing thought of it as a strategy to contain it, hamper its economic growth, and interfere with its national goals. Suddenly, the Indo-Pacific grew as a theater of great power conflict. Considering its geopolitical significance, its position in the Indian Ocean, its capacity to maintain, secure, and stabilize the maritime environment, its strategic partnerships, and its ability to balance power in the region, India’s position is inimitable in the Indo-Pacific. Between the ambitious powers like China and the global hegemon USA, India seems to play the role of swivel in the Indo-Pacific. Regardless of having interconnected economies, India has shared a complicated past with unsolved conflicts, leading to various military encounters with China. On the other hand, the US’s keen interest in roping in India as a strategic partner forges the Indo-Pacific region a unique zone of discord.

For India, the Indo-Pacific occupies a vital space in its strategic calculus. India’s approach towards the Indo-Pacific was profusely deciphered in Prime Minister Modi’s 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore. He presented several aspects of India’s strategy. The significance of partnerships and the advantages of cooperation were a crucial part of the speech. India has changed its foreign policy from being isolated to actively engaging in collaborations. It has drawn attention to the relevance of alliances in dealing with international matters and also maintaining the balance of power. However, while its openness to work together may bring it several opportunities, it was also crucial to stay away from any kind of groupings or conspiracies. The small neighbours of India are concerned about the major powers competing in the region for greater influence or their rivalries (for instance, Sino-Indian or US-Chinese), and for such middle powers, India can get to play the role of a leader which it wishes to in maintaining stability and peace in the region through cooperation and creative solutions. India also recognized the creation of a new security framework, as there is a shift in the global power structure, or as it seems to be disturbed. The new order should be based on laws and norms that are to be followed by all the states and which are free, open, transparent, and inclusive. Emphasis on these principles serves

as the foundation for developing alliances in the region. India also placed ASEAN at the centre of its vision and extended its support for a multipolar world order. Also, if the global order is shifting, India cannot remain impervious to the changing global politico-security scenario. The Indo-Pacific region provided India with the opportunity to achieve its global aspiration. Against this backdrop, the paper attempts to deeply delve into the ongoing regional dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region and great power geopolitical competition, engendering convulsion to profoundly impact the established power equilibrium. This paper also investigates how India sees the development and attempts to gear up to vigorously shape the geopolitical architecture through strategic partnerships, cooperation, and collaboration to meet its national objectives and tackle the foreseeable challenges, especially caused by the great power competition.

Contending Theses on the Brewing Contention in the Indo-Pacific between the US, China, and India

Given the contentious position of great powers in geo-strategically one of the most important regions of the world, there are intensely contending debates on the positions of the US, China, and India in the Indo-Pacific region. The US, China, and India have a complex relationship. The First debate is USA-centric. In the present scenario, China depends on the US as its biggest export market, while India's relationship with the US helps its emergence as a major power. The US supports India's rise as a key player to prevent any one country from dominating Asia. India concentrates its deterrence capabilities mainly on China, and China's are mainly aimed at the United States. Moreover, since the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War in the late forties, the United States has been working to secure its strategic interest in the Asia Pacific; first, it stood up with South Korea in the Korean War in fifties, the Vietnam War in sixties changed the contour of its engagement which resulted in several newer security calculus that continued till the end of the Cold War. With the fast penetration of globalisation and the rise of an increasingly assertive China to incessantly engender confrontation with its traditional allies, the US swiftly changed its gear to speed up its mission of accomplishing a free and open sea lane from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean. However, being a communist benefactor, China always viewed

the US as its ideological rival but needed its support to modernize through its funding and technology in post post-Nixon-Mao era. It remained under US hegemony until the time it became confident in its abilities. China depends on the US as its biggest export market. However, during the last few years, especially during Donald Trump's administration, the economic cooperation and competition eventually turned into a trade war.

Of late, the US is engaged in readjusting its strategic assets (infrastructure, alliances, and partnerships) in the Indo-Pacific to counter China's aggressive posture in the region. The US' paper on Indo-Pacific released by the White House vociferously acknowledges that the US has been renewing its "alliances and partnerships with Australia, Japan, the ROK, the Philippines, and Thailand—and strengthening relationships with leading regional partners, including India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mongolia, New Zealand, Singapore, Taiwan, Vietnam, and the Pacific Islands." Reinforcing the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) is the key strategy of the US. The US has sought "support and empower allies and partners as they take on regional leadership roles themselves", and pledged to "work in flexible groupings that pool [their] collective strength to face up to the defining issues of [the] time, particularly through the QUAD". Besides, the South China Sea is a crucial trade route and a focal point in the battle for Asian dominance between China and the United States. China needs weaker and submissive neighbouring states to stay dominant in Asia. The militarization of the South China Sea, however, is to buttress Beijing's economic design to dominate the region. This puts China in direct competition not only with the United States and Japan but also with India, and raises concerns about the potential for conflict. Also, Beijing is worried about New Delhi's involvement in the containment strategy with the US and Japan against it. India fears a China-American alliance could hinder its rise to power or lead to US recognition of China's sphere of influence in South Asia and Indian Ocean. These power dynamics require careful navigation and planning from all countries involved. On the other hand, India and the US had their disagreements over several issues given the Cold War period's compulsions, but even then, there was no ideological rivalry. India considered the US as a partner for its modernization. Notably, as President George W. Bush conveyed to India's former Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee during a meeting in 2002, the world was evolving, and

that India's prominence could play a pivotal role in balancing power throughout the entire Asian region. The emergence of India's economy was perceived as a boon for Washington's long-term interests as it would ensure that there were several opposing powers in Asia - China, Japan, and India - that could collectively prevent any one power from dominating the region. Whether India was referred to as an indispensable partner of the 21st century by President Barack Obama during his visit to India in 2015 or the former Secretary of Defense's acknowledgment of India's importance as the "linchpin" of the country's rebalance strategy all these rest on the fact that India has emerged as an inescapable partner in the Asian geopolitical matrix. Striking common concerns over China led them to find common ground. Now the mutuality of interests of the two powers has fastened together uniquely. For instance, apart from the QUAD, the US has strengthened the defense ties with India through the 2+2 ministerial format, the foundational agreements for strategic ties (like the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement, among others), and the growing interoperability capability of the two navies.

The second debate is China-centric and rests on three different grounds. Firstly, many Chinese studies make a clear connection between China's Naval expansion and its push in the Indian Ocean and the US's pivot to Asia and India's increased concentration on its maritime sphere. China proclaims that this leaves no choice but to develop a blue-water Indian Ocean-going naval force in the face of a shared strategic partnership between India and the US to deny China access to the IOR. This partnership would not have made Beijing worry if its existence had come into force before China's expansion. Since it was seen as a containment strategy by China, it has motivated Beijing to take further steps to develop a strong influence in the region as the dominant force. Secondly, China put forth that its presence in the Indian Ocean Region and its initiatives regarding the Maritime Silk Road are not designed to circumscribe India's long-standing position in the region. It does not intend to alter the geopolitical structure but is solely focused on its stability and development. Therefore, they claim that all the developments in IOR (e.g., Free trade agreements, new infrastructures, etc.) are for the desire for economic power and not for geopolitical influence. It also believes that India's interpretation of China's policies is influenced by Western misconceptions about China. Chinese scholars assert that

China and India share common interests and responsibility in the Indo-Pacific region, despite the bilateral issues going on, and it is willing to collaborate and consider India a strategic partner only if India removes the obstacles brought by third parties.

Thirdly, some currents of thought assert that Indian activities threaten China's use of maritime lines in the IOR, and a few claims that India wishes to preserve the northern Indian Ocean as its sphere of influence. China believes that the US is creating an alliance system to limit China, which includes India. India's participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue encourages the US and other states to view India as a dependable partner. This is perceived by Beijing as India's support to the US in its "Containment Strategy" for China. India is only focused on its growth and denies being part of any such strategy. This makes the whole understanding of the Indo-Pacific region more complex.

The third debate stems from Indo-centric concerns. **Firstly**, this underscores the fact that the Indian Ocean's significance to India has grown immensely, with successive governments since 1998 shifting their strategic focus to maritime interests. Vajpayee's administration laid the foundation by initiating the nuclear submarine program and founding the Andaman and Nicobar Command. The Manmohan Singh government accelerated these efforts, notably advancing the nuclear submarine initiative and deciding to construct the indigenous INS Vikrant aircraft carrier. A key factor in these moves was China's expanding presence in the Indian Ocean. By the late 1990s, Indian observers noted increased mentions of the Indian Ocean in Chinese documents, particularly in military contexts. China's acquisition of a Russian Kuznetsov-class aircraft carrier further piqued India's interest. Historically, the northern part of the Indian Ocean has been within India's sphere of influence. While India had been amenable to other actors in the region, there was an anticipation that China, given its booming economy, would seek ways to guard its maritime interests. However, what truly alarmed Indian experts was suggestions in PLA documents hinting at India's potential challenge to China in the area.

Secondly, being alarmed by China's assertive activities in the Indian Ocean, especially the construction of ports around the Indian peninsula, led to the "string of pearls" narrative, which China termed as part of the Maritime Silk Road. India's increasing concern that India drifted closer to the US and strengthen the maritime relationship

with it. India views this as a containment strategy of China. China's activities in the South China Sea and its naval presence in the northern Indian Ocean are perceived by India as strategic moves against its interests. China's disregard for India's genuine concerns in the Indo-Pacific region has brought India to the centre of the axis of the QUAD.

Thirdly, this is conspicuous from China's ambitions in Asia, often reflected in its desire to reclaim what it considers its territories and establish dominance in the region. China's approach has shifted from a reserved "hide and bide" strategy to a more assertive "seize and lead" stance since the global financial crisis of 2008. The implications of this change in attitude could be significant and warrant ongoing vigilance. In the absence of any major economic disruptions, China continues increasing significantly its power projection capabilities by establishing, for instance, a blue-water navy that includes four aircraft carriers, the world's largest submarine fleet, and missile capabilities that can effectively counter the US Navy from operating within the "first island chain" - an area that stretches from southern Japan through Taiwan and the Philippines to the South China Sea. This move is aimed at countering regional powers such as Japan and India. India's all possible steps are directed to reincarnate lately by beefing up strategic calculus. Moreover, to China, the Indo-Pacific concept is a ploy to contain China. This reinforces India's belief that China does not recognize India as an independent actor. If China expects India to disregard its Indo-Pacific strategy, thinking it is an aggressive move against China, it only intensifies the belief that China aims to limit India's influence, heightening tensions between the two nations.

India's Response to the Changing Dynamics in the Indo-Pacific Region

India's current national security strategy reflects a shift towards a pro-United States and pro-Japan stance, which is largely a response to the changing dynamics of the Indo-Pacific. This shift is particularly evident in India's efforts to build strategic relationships with these nations and signal to Beijing that it may potentially align with an anti-Chinese coalition if India's security is threatened. It is noteworthy that Narendra Modi, since taking office in 2014, has refrained from using the term "non-alignment," which is a departure from the Nehruvian approach. Instead, under Modi's leadership, India has adopted a more strategic approach of skillfully balancing power dynamics,

positioning itself as a prominent player in this regard. This shift can be attributed to Modi's vision of a "Modified India," which aims to wield greater influence and assertiveness on the global stage. The statements made by both the United States and India indicate their shared commitment to the freedom of navigation and overflight. This suggests that the Modi government is not hesitant to openly coordinate with the U.S. in the Indo-Pacific region to curb China's aggressive expansionist agenda.

Should China continue to be perceived as a threat to India's interests, the nation's alignment with the United States could ultimately become a firm alliance against China. However, if China adopts a more moderate foreign policy and commits to multilateral efforts, it could potentially improve its relationships with both the United States and India. It is worth noting that while Asian nations seek economic benefits from China, none wish to live under its shadow, and all hope for regional stability.

India is considering Japan as its preferred security partner in Asia, given the uncertain future of Russia. Both India and Japan have unresolved disputes with China that tend to escalate periodically, and neither country is adequately equipped to handle them. However, due to their strategic location concerning China's southwest and northeast, and the impact of China's power and ambitions on them, India and Japan are well-positioned to maintain power equilibrium and protect critical sea lanes. Japan currently provides the most significant amount of overseas development assistance to India and is also actively participating in India's "Make in India" manufacturing programs. This is particularly crucial for India's defense-industrial base, which seeks to augment its capabilities with advanced technology.

When analyzing power dynamics in Asia, it is important to consider the relationship between India and Russia. While Moscow remains a significant partner for India in sensitive technology projects like missiles, nuclear submarines, and fighter aircraft, stronger strategic ties between the US and India could weaken the traditional bonds between Russia and India. Additionally, Russia and India no longer share the same views on China. Moscow has shifted its focus towards China and Pakistan, downgrading India from an "exclusive" to a "preferred" partner. As a result, strategic and energy ties between China and Russia are currently more substantial than those between India and Russia.

Rejigged India's Grand Indo-Pacific Strategy

India is capable of securing its national interests through strategic partnerships with states like Japan and the US by counterbalancing China, but cutting all ties with it is neither possible nor beneficial for India. **First**, amid a border dispute and geopolitical rivalry with China, India opts for an inclusive stance in the Indo-Pacific, a choice rooted in its strategic goals. Primarily, India aims to attain its developmental objectives by maintaining high economic growth, which necessitates significant investment in infrastructure and state capabilities. **Secondly**, with historical challenges from nuclear neighbors Pakistan and China, who often collaborate, India emphasizes military strength. India has been a top military equipment importer for years. **Thirdly**, India seeks Asian stability, given its economic reliance on regional sea routes. Consequently, India balances its defense reliance on the West and economic interests in the East. While Russia remains a defense supplier, its share has decreased in favor of the US and its allies. Moreover, China has grown as India's primary trade partner. India's dual needs – economic engagement with China and a security partnership with the US – require a delicate balance, especially considering potential military confrontations with China. Thus, if the Indo-Pacific strategy seems like a move to contain China, India might hesitate.

Despite being a democratic nation with ongoing border tensions with China and being in competition for influence in Asia, India adopts a China-friendly view of the Indo-Pacific region. This choice emerges from India's strategic goals, which dictate its actions. Thus, India aims to uplift its impoverished population by stimulating economic growth, necessitating significant investments in social and economic infrastructures. India also strives to maintain its security against threats, especially from nuclear-armed neighbors like Pakistan and China. Historically, India has heavily imported military equipment to bolster its defenses. And, India emphasizes ensuring tranquility in Asia, given the paramount economic importance of sea routes for its trade.

With these priorities in mind, India has strategically sought military strength from the West and economic ties with the East. While Russia has been a historic defense ally, India's reliance on it has diminished over time. Simultaneously, trade ties with China have amplified, making China a significant trade partner for India. Balancing economic

cooperation with China and ensuring security against threats from both China and Pakistan means India strengthens its relationship with the US while avoiding major conflicts along its border with China.

Moreover, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which involves substantial infrastructure investments in countries surrounding India, presents another layer of strategic concern. Despite the questionable impact and reception of BRI in terms of real influence, Indian policymakers remain wary of the shifting geopolitical landscape due to this initiative. To counterbalance Beijing's influence, India seeks collaboration with other regional powers. Efforts like the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor with Japan and initiatives aligning with US interests highlight India's cooperative strategy.

India's stance on the Indo-Pacific aims for inclusivity, emphasizing shared principles like adherence to rules, mutual respect, and promoting trade over strategic rivalry. This approach resonates with India's desire not to revert to the power politics reminiscent of the Cold War era. Distinctively, India's view on the Indo-Pacific contrasts with those of the US, Japan, and Australia, each having its own set of concerns regarding China. While India values its defense ties with Russia and wishes to engage constructively with China, it remains resolute in confronting any security crisis involving Beijing. Consequently, India's actions in the Indo-Pacific realm, like declining Australia's involvement in naval exercises, indicate its cautious approach to avoid any unnecessary escalation, especially with China.

Moreover, Southeast Asia can see significant strategic advantages when looking at India's perspective and involvement in the Indo-Pacific. India's keenness to foster economic connections with this region provides ASEAN nations an avenue to engage in a vast and expanding market for trade and investments. The proactive diplomatic efforts of the Modi administration in this area assuage certain worries regarding balancing out China's dominance. Nonetheless, an inherent conflict between India's Indo-Pacific approach and its broader strategic plan, could limit its security assurance to Southeast Asia.

The dilemma is that as India pursues its ambitions of becoming a global power, maintaining strategic independence becomes challenging. Achieving such a status demands taking definitive stances and actively intervening in global disputes to ensure stability. In the past, the US singularly provided this stability in Southeast Asia,

guaranteeing regional partners that its military might would fend off major security threats. ASEAN flourished under this safeguard but now searches for new security allies in a world that's becoming more diverse and less predictable. India, due to both its resources and strategic doctrine, is hesitant and not fully equipped to aid the US in its growing challenge of upholding regional peace, especially with China's rising influence.

Likewise, Japan and Australia might share similar sentiments individually. This is why numerous experts from Washington, Tokyo, and Canberra view (or hope to view) the QUAD as an initial move to pool resources and align strategies with India, aiming to counter China. However, they face the challenge that India is not a formal ally of the US. As long as India can gain from Washington's defense and economic support without a substantial pledge, it's unlikely to become one. India's involvement with the QUAD has largely been verbal until now.

The Way Ahead

India is strategically utilizing its diplomatic ties with the United States to counter the increasing sway of China and tackle the challenges posed together with and Pakistan. The United States recognizes the pivotal role of India in preserving regional stability and security, particularly across the Indian Ocean and its periphery. Despite the U.S. assisting India's emergence as a dominant force, China perceives India as a potential adversary and remains cautious of its strategic objectives, which could potentially heighten tensions in the vicinity. Therefore, India needs to recognize and address China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean. India must encourage China to operate cooperatively rather than unilaterally. To achieve this, India needs to strengthen its maritime capabilities and build capacity for smaller island states. Additionally, India needs to deepen its defense cooperation with like-minded partners such as the United States, Japan, Australia, Indonesia, and France. It is imperative to engage China in security cooperation and dialogue, and at the same time, strengthen regional diplomatic institutions. By doing so, India can effectively address the security challenges posed by China's presence in the Indian Ocean.

India needs to maintain a balanced approach in building partnerships, including direct engagement with China in maritime security. Bilateral dialogue is necessary to address the increasing

likelihood of naval encounters in the Indo-Pacific region. Discussions should expand to address sensitive topics such as submarine activity and protocols for preventing incidents at sea. Offering joint activities could reduce the need for unilateral action by the PLA Navy in the Indian Ocean.

India must improve its capabilities in Indian Ocean diplomacy by boosting the defense budget, prioritizing the allocation of funds for the Navy, and optimizing the procurement and induction processes for new platforms and systems. India must prioritize the expansion of its foreign service, which has been struggling to keep up with the growing demand. Moreover, India must adopt a systematic approach towards coordinating its capacity-building and development assistance efforts among the countries in the Indian Ocean region. This can be achieved by aligning these efforts with a larger and more comprehensive strategic vision.

However, the current situation points to two potential futures: one in which India, propelled by crises, takes a more assertive stance in the Indo-Pacific, and another where India becomes more insular, especially if the US and its partners reevaluate their support for India's growth indefinitely. For the well-being of Southeast Asia, one of these possibilities is more favorable. Hence, regional leaders must influence India's ascent towards a more favorable direction.

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Power, Conflict and Gendered Struggles in South Asia: The Intersection of Political Instability and Displacement

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Introduction

Bangladesh's political environment has long drawn the attention of both regional and international observers due to its persistent volatility, sustained conflict, and complex socio-economic challenges. Within this landscape, the intersection of patriarchy, political instability, and gender-based violence becomes increasingly evident. The leadership and recent political struggles of Sheikh Hasina, a prominent female figure in South Asian politics, exemplify how patriarchal structures shape women's participation in governance and broader geopolitical dynamics. Her decision to seek refuge in India highlights the intersection of political instability, gender violence, and regional conflict, further complicating the socio-political dynamics of the area (Hasina, 2011, p. 125). The refugee crises emanating from Bangladesh, particularly the mass displacement of Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar, have introduced another layer of complexity to the region's already fragile state. The impact of these developments on women, especially in conflict zones, has been underexplored in existing literature. This paper aims to analyze Sheikh Hasina's personal and political journey as a lens to examine the interrelated dynamics of patriarchy, conflict, and forced migration, while also reflecting on the

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broader implications for India and its regional strategies. The argument presented here is that understanding the intersection of gender, conflict, and displacement is essential for addressing the broader socio-political challenges facing South Asia (Kapoor, 2017, p. 29).

Historical Context of Political Instability in South Asia

The roots of Bangladesh's political instability trace back to its liberation war in 1971, fought not only against Pakistan but also against oppressive socio-political systems, including patriarchal ones. The conflict left deep divisions within the political landscape, creating enduring tensions that still shape the country's governance and foreign relations (Chatterjee, 2004, p. 45). The persistence of political violence and systemic corruption has weakened democratic governance, limiting the state's ability to address social and economic inequalities, which often disproportionately affect women. Additionally, the continued prevalence of patriarchal attitudes has greatly impacted women's political involvement, particularly those in leadership roles (Hasina, 2011, p. 123). Historically, South Asia has had women in influential political positions, such as Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan, Indira Gandhi in India, and Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh. Despite navigating challenging political environments, these women have often faced the additional burden of patriarchal scrutiny. This scrutiny reflects broader societal attitudes that undermine the authority of women in leadership, questioning their legitimacy in ways male counterparts do not experience (Yousafzai, 2013, p. 67). These leaders have not only faced external political opposition but also entrenched gender-based discrimination that affects their ability to lead effectively (Bhutto, 1988, p. 112; Kapoor, 2017, p. 33).

Sheikh Hasina's political journey exemplifies the intersection of gender, power, and patriarchy. As the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Hasina has navigated a volatile political environment marked by protests, violent uprisings, and an ongoing battle against her main opposition, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Her leadership, like that of other women in South Asia, has been shaped by personal attacks that often focus on her gender and perceived vulnerability rather than her policies or achievements (Hasina, 2011, p. 130; Kapoor, 2017, p. 33).

Patriarchy and Gender-Based Violence in Conflict

The role of patriarchy in conflict zones is deeply ingrained, especially in regions where political violence, instability, and entrenched gender norms converge. In countries like Bangladesh, political unrest often manifests in violent protests, civil disobedience, and state-sponsored violence, with gender-based violence being an inherent part of this larger conflict. Women, particularly those in leadership positions or opposition, are subjected to targeted violence and public shaming, reflecting patriarchal power structures and seeking to undermine their political agency and authority. In Bangladesh, the ongoing political strife has disproportionately impacted women in leadership, with prominent female political figures, such as Sheikh Hasina, being targeted not only by political violence but also by gendered attacks that exploit deep-rooted patriarchal views on women's roles in public life. Hasina's decision to leave the country and seek asylum in India, following threats to her life and her personal belongings on public display, underscores the intersection of political instability and gender-based violence. In a society where power is often linked to masculinity, Hasina's leadership was framed as a challenge to the accepted patriarchal order, making her vulnerable to not only political violence but also social ostracism that was distinctly gendered. Her experiences mirror those of other female political leaders in South Asia, such as Benazir Bhutto and Indira Gandhi, who similarly faced violence, political isolation, and gendered vilification (Chatterjee, 2004, p. 49; Bhutto, 1988, p. 120; Gandhi, 1979, p. 98).

The patriarchal framework exacerbates the vulnerability of women leaders in these environments. Patriarchy, in its most insidious form, is not just about male domination but also a cultural construct that shapes the way women in power are perceived and treated. In South Asia, media narratives significantly perpetuate these gendered expectations. Female leaders, regardless of their political achievements, are often scrutinized for personal aspects of their lives—appearance, marital status, or family—elements that are irrelevant to their political competence. This scrutiny reinforces patriarchal norms that question the legitimacy of women in power, reducing their political authority to their gender roles rather than their qualifications (Kapoor, 2017, p. 36; Yousafzai, 2013, p. 75).

Moreover, gender-based violence extends beyond personal attacks to the political realm. The persecution of women politicians is not

just about physical violence or public humiliation but also involves the strategic use of societal attitudes to create hostile environments for them. Gendered violence in conflict zones can take various forms, from harassment to sexual violence, and is often intended to silence women or push them out of politics. This phenomenon is not unique to South Asia but is seen globally, where women’s political involvement is often met with violence that reinforces their marginalization. Patriarchal attitudes in conflict zones also intersect with other forms of discrimination, such as class and ethnicity, further intensifying the vulnerabilities women face. For example, women from marginalized communities may experience compounded violence, targeting both their gender and their social status, creating additional barriers to political participation. This intersectionality magnifies the challenges women face in navigating political spaces and securing their rights in deeply patriarchal societies. The violence women endure is closely tied to their societal roles, and dismantling these entrenched patriarchal structures is essential for advancing gender equality and women’s involvement in conflict resolution and political processes.

The violence against the women of Bangladesh can be understood as per the table given below.

Bangladesh’s Performance in the Women, Peace, and Security Index 2023/24

Dimension	Indicator	Performance	Score/Details
Inclusion	Access to Education	High	High enrolment rates for girls in primary and secondary education.
Legal Rights (Equality before the law)	Economic Participation (Labor Force)	Low	Limited female participation in high-paying jobs and leadership roles.
	Political Representation	Low	Low percentage of women in the national parliament.
	Financial Inclusion	Low	Limited access for women to financial services and credit.

Social Norms (Gender Bias)	Moderate	Some legal frameworks exist but are not fully implemented in practice.	
	High	Cultural norms continue to restrict women's full participation in society.	
Justice	Political Violence Targeting Women	High	High levels of political violence are affecting women in the region.
	Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)	High	High rates of domestic violence and intimate partner violence.
	Community Safety (Public Violence)	Moderate	Women face safety concerns in public spaces, though there is some improvement.
Security	Justice System Access	Moderate	Women's access to justice is improving, but it remains a challenge.
	Maternal Mortality Rate	High	High maternal mortality rates, though efforts to improve have been ongoing.
	Violence against Women	High	High rates of sexual and gender-based violence in the country. Legal protections exist, but enforcement is often weak.

	Legal Protection from Violence	Moderate	
	Risk of Conflict/Displacement	Low	Bangladesh faces fewer risks from direct conflict but does experience displacement due to natural disasters.
General Country Score	Overall Women, Peace, and Security Score	Moderate to Low	0.506 overall score, ranking 151st out of 177 countries.

Source: Women, Peace, and Security Index 2023/24 Report, Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace & Security

The Rohingya Refugee Crisis and Its Gendered Dimensions

The Rohingya refugee crisis represents one of the most significant humanitarian challenges in recent years, with profound social, political, and gendered consequences for both Bangladesh and the wider South Asian region. Since August 2017, over a million Rohingya Muslims have fled Myanmar due to violence, persecution, and systematic discrimination. The massive influx of refugees has placed tremendous strain on Bangladesh's already limited resources, particularly in the Cox's Bazar region, where overcrowded camps are home to hundreds of thousands of displaced individuals. The stress on infrastructure, healthcare, and essential services is further aggravated by ongoing political instability in the region, leaving the country to manage both internal and external pressures. Beyond Bangladesh, the crisis also affects neighboring countries like India, which has faced its challenges with border security and migration policies, while global actors grapple with the broader implications for regional stability (UN Women, 2019, p. 22).

While the crisis impacts all Rohingya refugees, women face unique and particularly severe challenges that are distinctly gendered. Female refugees are especially vulnerable to gender-based violence, including sexual violence, exploitation, and trafficking. These abuses occur not only from local perpetrators but also from fellow refugees within the camps, where patriarchal power dynamics can increase the risks to women's safety and well-being. With limited access to legal protection,

education, and healthcare, women refugees find themselves in precarious situations, often forced to make difficult decisions to safeguard themselves and their families. Many are exposed to sexual violence due to a lack of safe spaces and are vulnerable to exploitation by aid workers, smugglers, or men within their communities. The absence of legal recourse and the social stigma surrounding gender-based violence further silences women's voices, reinforcing their marginalization (UN Women, 2019, p. 35).

The gendered aspects of displacement are particularly evident in how women and girls experience the refugee journey. Many women resort to survival strategies that increase their vulnerability, such as engaging in transactional sex, assuming leadership roles in the absence of male relatives, or facing early marriage for security or basic needs. These coping mechanisms, while providing temporary solutions, perpetuate gender inequality and expose women to greater risks of abuse, exploitation, and disease. The intersection of gender and displacement means that refugee women experience the trauma of displacement in ways that heighten their susceptibility to abuse and neglect.

Furthermore, the refugee crisis highlights the complex nature of transnational identities and the tensions that arise due to displacement. Many Rohingya, who identify as both Rohingya Muslims and Bangladeshis, find themselves in a state of limbo, caught between their historical ties to Myanmar and the political and social marginalization they face in Bangladesh. While they are often viewed as outsiders in Myanmar, they are also treated with suspicion and hostility in Bangladesh, despite being the host country. This dual marginalization forces refugees to confront not only the trauma of displacement but also a constant struggle to preserve their cultural identity while attempting to integrate into a new, often hostile socio-political environment. This tension between maintaining one's ethnic and religious identity and adapting to a new national context is especially complex for women, whose roles are shaped by both survival strategies in refugee camps and the expectations of traditional gender norms within their community (Chatterjee, 2004, p. 55; Kapoor, 2017, p. 40).

The Rohingya refugee crisis also highlights broader issues of statelessness and the political and legal invisibility of displaced populations. The Rohingya's lack of citizenship in Myanmar, combined

with their uncertain legal status in Bangladesh and other neighboring countries, has left them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Statelessness itself becomes a gendered issue, as women and girls are particularly affected by the denial of legal rights and protections. Without formal recognition, these women face obstacles in accessing healthcare, education, and employment, further deepening their social and economic disenfranchisement. The crisis underscores the urgent need for a comprehensive approach that addresses the gendered dimensions of displacement, incorporating the specific needs and rights of women in humanitarian responses and long-term solutions.

Sheikh Hasina's Asylum in India: Implications for Regional Geopolitics

Sheikh Hasina's decision to seek asylum in India represents a significant moment in South Asian geopolitics, particularly when considering the region's long-standing political instability and the challenges posed by refugee crises. As one of the most prominent leaders in Bangladesh, Hasina's request for asylum reflects not only her safety but also the wider political and social implications of such a move. The asylum request signals potential shifts in the delicate balance of power and foreign relations within the region, especially between India and Bangladesh, two countries with deep-rooted historical, cultural, and political ties (Hasan, 2022, p. 45).

India's response to Hasina's asylum case will undoubtedly have profound consequences for its foreign policy, especially with Bangladesh. Historically, India has maintained close diplomatic and economic relations with Bangladesh, given the shared border, cultural ties, and common history of fighting for independence (Das, 2019, p. 28). However, the political dynamics between the two countries have fluctuated over time, shaped by shifting regional alliances, security concerns, and differing policy priorities. As a result, Hasina's asylum request is more than just a matter of individual political asylum; it is a key test of India's commitment to its neighboring country's political stability and its approach to hosting foreign political figures under duress. India's handling of Hasina's case could reflect its broader approach to the protection of asylum seekers and refugees, especially as both countries continue to grapple with the consequences of mass displacement from conflict zones such as Myanmar (Chakma, 2021, p. 118). India's historical record with refugee management is complex

and often marked by inconsistencies. For instance, India has seen large inflows of refugees from neighboring conflict zones such as Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, and Tibet, each presenting different geopolitical challenges and solutions (Rao, 2018, p. 135). India's policies towards refugees have been shaped by concerns related to national security, regional stability, and domestic politics. In some cases, India has offered refuge to political leaders fleeing persecution, but its treatment of refugees on the whole has been less consistent, with asylum applications often facing prolonged delays or outright denial (Sundaram, 2020, p. 115). The government's response to Hasina's asylum request would therefore signal India's evolving stance on political asylum in the region and its willingness to take on a more active role in addressing political crises within its neighboring states.

In the broader context of South Asian geopolitics, Hasina's asylum case also brings to the forefront India's positioning vis-à-vis regional conflicts and its relationship with Bangladesh's political opposition. Bangladesh's political landscape is divided, with the ruling Awami League, led by Sheikh Hasina, locked in a tense and often violent rivalry with the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and other opposition groups (Kabir, 2021, p. 97). India's intervention in the asylum request could influence its relations not only with the ruling party in Bangladesh but also with opposition factions. Any perceived bias in India's support of Hasina could have repercussions for Bangladesh's internal politics and its relationship with India. Conversely, providing asylum to Hasina could signal India's disapproval of the political climate in Bangladesh, further complicating diplomatic ties (Ahmed, 2019, p. 103). India's approach to Hasina's asylum request may also have broader implications for its stance on regional security and refugee management in South Asia. The region is already home to one of the largest refugee crises in the world, with millions displaced by conflict, political instability, and environmental disasters (Choudhury, 2022, p. 5). The ongoing Rohingya refugee crisis, in particular, highlights the vulnerability of both Bangladesh and India to the pressures of managing mass displacement. India's handling of Hasina's asylum request could send a message to other nations grappling with refugee flows, including Myanmar and Sri Lanka, about how India views regional cooperation, security concerns, and humanitarian obligations (Bhatia, 2021, p. 12). At a time when issues of cross-border migration, refugee rights, and statelessness are rising

on the global agenda, India's policy decisions could significantly influence regional debates surrounding these issues.

Furthermore, Hasina's asylum request raises questions about the role of gender in regional geopolitics. As a prominent female leader in a male-dominated political environment, Hasina's situation sheds light on the intersection of gender, power, and political asylum. Her status as a woman in a high-profile political role in South Asia, where patriarchal structures still dominate, places her in a unique position within the regional and global political discourse (Rahman, 2020, p. 122). India's decision to grant or deny asylum to a female political leader like Hasina could be seen as a reflection of its stance on gender equality in politics and its perception of women in power. The way Hasina's gender influences her treatment within this geopolitical crisis offers insight into how women's political agency is often mediated by broader political and social norms, even when dealing with issues of international diplomacy (Barua, 2019, p. 511). Moreover, Hasina's asylum case also highlights the tensions between national sovereignty and regional solidarity. While Bangladesh and India share deep cultural and economic ties, their political interests and priorities often diverge, particularly when it comes to border security, migration, and the treatment of refugees (Zaman, 2021, p. 212). India's decision to grant asylum to Hasina could be seen as a gesture of solidarity with a neighboring leader under threat, but it could also strain the delicate relationship between the two nations, especially if it is perceived as interference in Bangladesh's internal politics. Conversely, a denial of asylum could have significant diplomatic repercussions, signalling to Bangladesh that India is unwilling to intervene in its political disputes, but it could also lead to strained relations with Hasina's political allies. Nevertheless, Sheikh Hasina's asylum request in India carries far-reaching implications not only for her future but for regional politics in South Asia. India's response will signal its approach to refugee management, its stance on political asylum, and its willingness to engage in regional crises. In addition, Hasina's asylum case raises important questions about gender, political leadership, and power dynamics in a patriarchal South Asian context. As this political drama unfolds, it will undoubtedly shape the future trajectory of India-Bangladesh relations and set a precedent for how the region addresses political instability, migration, and the rights of women in politics.

The Role of Women in Conflict and Post-Conflict Political Reconstruction in South Asia

As South Asia grapples with political violence, displacement, and gender-based inequalities, it is essential to consider the roles women play in both conflict and post-conflict reconstruction. While conflict often disproportionately affects women, they also possess unique capacities for political involvement, negotiation, and peacebuilding that can significantly contribute to the region's long-term stability. South Asia's political history, including the experiences of Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan, reveals a consistent failure to recognize women's contributions to peacebuilding and political reconstruction. The experiences of women leaders such as Sheikh Hasina and Benazir Bhutto have been overshadowed by patriarchal governance structures, which limit the acknowledgment and empowerment of women as political agents. The role of women in conflict and post-conflict contexts is crucial to the process of rebuilding, reconciliation, and ensuring long-term peace. However, the gendered nature of conflict means that women face specific challenges when participating in political reconstruction. In Bangladesh, for example, women's roles in post-liberation peace processes were marginalized, despite their significant contributions during the liberation struggle. The silencing of women's voices in post-conflict societies like Bangladesh results in a limited understanding of the unique needs of women in conflict zones and undermines their potential for leadership in political and social transformation (Kapoor, 2017, p. 50). Only by recognizing women as active agents in conflict resolution and political rebuilding can South Asia hope to move toward a more inclusive, stable, and gender-equitable future.

Conclusion

The intersection of patriarchy, political instability, and gender-based violence remains central to understanding the dynamics of political conflict in South Asia, particularly in Bangladesh. The experiences of female leaders like Sheikh Hasina and displaced women, such as the Rohingya refugees, highlight the significant challenges that women face when navigating both the public and private spheres in conflict settings. In Bangladesh, as in many parts of South Asia, patriarchal norms continue to shape the political landscape, restricting women's

participation in governance and exacerbating gender-based violence. The need for gender-sensitive policies and interventions is crucial in addressing these challenges, both in Bangladesh and the broader region. Furthermore, the situation of the Rohingya refugees underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding of the gendered dimensions of displacement, which are often overlooked in mainstream discussions of the refugee crisis. By focusing on the intersection of gender, conflict, and displacement, we can develop more effective strategies to protect and empower women in conflict zones and refugee settings. The role of women in shaping the future of South Asia, and indeed the world, must not be overlooked. Their political agency and contributions to peacebuilding are essential for achieving sustainable and inclusive political solutions to regional instability.

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A Step Towards Legal Transformation in India Through New Criminal Laws: An Analytical Study

Dr. Taruna Solanki and Govind Gupta

Introduction

India has introduced a set of new criminal laws, marking a significant development in the country's legal framework. These changes represent a step in the ongoing process of legal reform. As core components of a nation's legal architecture, criminal laws play a crucial role in shaping the administration of justice and public order. When the need for change in law arises, it reflects the demands of a dynamic society. India's criminal justice system has been developed through various periods, but the paradigm shift in the Indian legal scenario was ushered in by the Britishers, who played a vital role to draft and enact the criminal laws for India. However, the need to decolonise the centuries-old criminal laws was prominent to make a shift from colonised laws to constitutionally directed laws concerning the people of India.

The colonial-era criminal laws were framed within the context of British governance in India and were primarily intended to serve the administrative and political interests of the colonial regime. The laws focused on punitive measures instead of preventive or restorative justice, which failed to address some of the underlying social issues. India, being a land of diverse culture, needs dynamic laws that can address the evolving concerns of various sections of society. The colonial laws were short of protecting women and children adequately. With the growing need to protect women and children from various

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abuses, it became imperative to address this issue specifically. Similarly, with the fast-paced development in technology, legal procedures are also witnessing significant modifications, which cannot be fulfilled and catered by old, lengthy and stringent legal provisions. The new Criminal laws aim to meet the needs of the hour and establish a strong connection with the changing Indian society.

With the enactment of new criminal laws, old criminal laws, i.e. Indian Penal Code, 1860, Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973 and Indian Evidence Act, 1872, have been replaced by Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023, Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS), 2023 and Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam (BSA), 2023, respectively. These new laws have taken a nuanced approach to reshape and redefine the criminal justice system of India.

As per the Menon Committee report, “India, in the new millennium, is on a path of unprecedented developments on all fronts. The economy is assuming strength to eradicate poverty and to improve the quality of life of the average citizen. Technology is bringing in greater efficiency, transparency and the people’s participation in governance. Naturally, law and order generally and criminal justice in particular, have become the focus of attention of not only the governments and the people within the country but also of the international community seeking to develop relations with the country” (MHA, 2007)

With the object of ensuring speedy justice, the complete overhaul of criminal laws are certainly going to bring reformation in various sectors beginning from law enforcement and judiciary to ultimately common public.

Overview and Analysis of New Criminal Laws

To align the Criminal laws with the needs and challenges posed by the evolving society, reforms have been introduced by enacting new criminal laws i.e. BNS, BNSS, BSA to deal with the inefficiency and ambiguities existed in erstwhile criminal laws. The new criminal laws have gone into effect from 1st July 2024 to all over India by modernizing and streamlining the legal framework replacing the old colonial era laws.

Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, which replaces the Indian Penal Code, 1860, has made a significant transformative shift in the substantive law of India. To address the contemporary issues and

challenges of the 21st Century, a rationalised legal framework is very much essential. To be in tune with the demands and aspirations of society, BNS has given a new shape to certain crimes and punishments. Many progressive changes and commendable elements have been included by inserting new definitions, such as the definition of 'gender' includes transgender as well. Some archaic terms, such as 'queen ' and 'British India', have been omitted. Many new offences have been recognised as crimes, such as terrorist acts, organised crimes, petty organised crimes, offences against the state, Mob Lynching, Snatching, etc.

The government's commitment towards zero tolerance of crime against women and children is evident in BNS, 2023, where a separate chapter (Chapter 5 of BNS) for offences against women and children has been inserted, which avoids the difficulty that used to arise through scattered provisions for such offences existing in the old law. Many offences have been made 'gender neutral' where the gender of the victim and offender is no longer relevant, such as Voyeurism (Section 77 of BNS). Unnatural offences and Adultery have been deleted, which were previously mentioned under sections 377 and 497 of the Indian Penal Code, 1860. Prioritising national interest, any act of making or publishing false or misleading information, which tends to jeopardise the sovereignty, unity, integrity or security of India has been made an offence under the BNS. Similarly, abetment from abroad has been added as an offence under Section 48 of BNS, which punishes any person (including a foreigner) who, while being outside India, abets the commission of an offence in India. Introduction of a new form of punishment that is 'Community Service' for petty offences reflects a steady shift towards a reformatory approach while ensuring justice. This significant change not only aims at paving the way from just punishment to justice but also highlights the potential benefits that communities can derive after reforming the offenders by preventing them from becoming hardcore criminals.

To avoid the sluggish process of ensuring justice and to align with the constitutional and democratic aspirations, many remarkable changes have been introduced through BNSS that replaces the Criminal Procedure Code, 1973. Amongst many, some of the salient features are the use of technology and the inclusion of forensic science in the investigation of crime. As per Section 63 BNSS, 2023, summons can be issued through electronic means of communication. A technology-

oriented process is also evident under Section 173(1) of BNSS, where the provision regarding the filing of Zero FIR has been mentioned. It also permits the lodging of e-FIR. Similarly, under section 105, videography of search and seizure has been made mandatory. As per section 176(3) of BNSS, offences are punishable for more than 7 years in such cases, forensic investigation shall be conducted to trace and collect the evidence. Additionally, section 254 of BNSS provides examination of witnesses through audio-video means.

To accelerate the proceedings, section 346 of BNSS provides that no more than two adjournments shall be granted to a party in extreme circumstances. To continue legal proceedings without delay, in the case of proclaimed offenders, Section 356(1) provides for an in absentia trial against proclaimed offenders. Moreover, Section 479 of BNSS provides that bail shall be granted to first-time offenders when they have been into the detention for one-third of the maximum period of imprisonment prescribed for that offence. Likewise, Section 480 of BNSS lays down that bail shall not be denied to an accused in certain non-bailable cases on the ground that he needs to be identified by witness during the investigation or his police custody is required for more than 15 days, provided that he is otherwise entitled for the bail and ready to comply with all the conditions and directions for the same.

BNSS also strives to strengthen victim assistance mechanisms. Provision mentioned under section 398 provides for a witness protection scheme. Additionally, to resolve the issue of delay in justice and to expedite the process, specification of a timeline for investigation, trial and pronouncement of judgement has been prescribed. Thus, the BNSS is a necessary reformation of the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973, to fast-track and modernise the legal procedures of the criminal justice system in India.

To upgrade and update the rules of evidence, Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam, 2023, replaces the Indian Evidence Act, 1872. BSA not only aims at modernising the evidentiary framework but also strives to integrate evolving technological advancements to address the challenges posed by digital records. The overhaul of the Indian Evidence Act, 1872, is driven by the necessity to be in sync with new evolving technologies in society. In today's tech-oriented environment, where the progress of digitalisation is at its peak, it is very important to acknowledge digital evidence. According to the new law, the word

‘evidence’ shall also include electronic information, and it also allows the appearance of parties through electronic means. The definition of ‘document’ mentioned under section 2(1)(d) of BSA, 2023 also includes electronic and digital records. Under section 22, coercion has been added as a new ground to make any confession irrelevant. Moreover, the scope of primary and secondary evidence has been enlarged under sections 57 and 58 of the BSA. Additionally, the word lunacy has been substituted by ‘mental illnesses’. Under section 61 of the BSA, electronic and digital records are admissible in the same manner as any other document.

The Malimath committee report states that, “the ultimate aim of criminal law is protection of right to personal liberty against invasion by others, protection of the weak against the strong, law-abiding against lawless, peaceful against the violent. To protect the rights of the citizens, the State prescribes the rules of conduct, sanctions for their violation, machinery to enforce sanctions and procedure to protect that machinery. It is utter selfishness, greed and intolerance that lead to deprivation of life, liberty and property of other citizens, requiring the State to step in for the protection of the citizens’ rights. James Madison writes in his book *The Federalist* that “if men were angels, no government would be necessary”. It is the primary function of the government to protect the basic rights to life and property. The State has to give protection to persons against lawlessness, disorderly behaviour, violent acts and fraudulent deeds of others. Liberty cannot exist without the protection of the basic rights of the citizens by the Government” (MHA, Committee on Reforms of Criminal Justice System, 2003).

Indian criminal law is undoubtedly an instrument of social control, moulding and guiding us in more than one way (Bajpai, 2023). The step taken by the government to revisit the criminal laws has been crucial so far. Effective governance is characterised by remarkably impactful decisions that are directed to promote progress and inclusivity, and the enforcement of new criminal laws navigates towards the same. The primary aim of introducing these laws is to foster a conducive environment that has the potential to enhance the security and well-being of the nation through efficacious law enforcement and a speedy justice system.

Currently, India is in the transformational stage, and all the stakeholders are in the stage of observation regarding the success and

impact of the new legislations, which might bring in a sea change in how the criminal justice system will work in India in light of the new legislations. (Bangali, 2024).

Conclusion

Legislative reforms brought about by the new criminal laws emphasise upon integration of the progressive changes to make the criminal justice system sound and efficient having cohesive legal landscape to effectively address modern challenges of the 21st century. An analysis of new criminal laws depicts that the path of transformation was not made overnight. It was the result of years of study to understand the needs of society. The judiciary played a vital role in being the guiding force towards making laws which are in tandem with its landmark decisions, guidelines and observations that can serve society to a great extent. Moreover, the leverage of technology in more than one way in new criminal laws reflects its seamless insertion into the system. It shall not only make the system accountable and transparent but also time-bound. However, the challenges posed due to a lack of digital infrastructure and, lack of tech know-how have to be dealt with simultaneously to run in parallelly in the digital age.

New Criminal laws are committed to upholding fairness, equity and justice to all. The transformation of criminal justice in any country or even in the entire world will happen and will be a continued subject matter till the time there is a continuous change in the use and modality of the technology. In the light of the provisions of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023 and Bharatiya Sakshya Adhinyam, 2023 India as a nation has made a remarkable inroad in transforming the criminal justice system, which is more victim centric, together with the imposition of provisions and procedures which are inculcating the scientific and forensic techniques in real practical world (Bangali, 2024).

Also, the inculcation of community service can potentially reduce recidivism and help to improve rehabilitating efforts. However, to maximize the potential of such services and their effective execution, it is required to have active participation of non-governmental organizations and engagement of various stakeholders from the community.

The introduction of three criminal laws has brought significant reforms with extensive implications for the country's justice system.

In the words of the Justice Verma Committee, “the purpose of law is to prescribe the standard of behaviour of the people and to regulate their conduct in a civilised society. Faithful implementation of the laws is of the essence under the rule of law for good governance. In the absence of faithful implementation of the laws by efficient machinery, the laws remain mere rhetoric and a dead letter” (MHA, Report of the Committee on Amendments to Criminal Law, 2013). The reformations in criminal laws are executed with numerous aims and objectives, which include but are not limited to the elimination of colonial influence from the Indian criminal legal framework, giving legislative effect to remarkable judicial pronouncements and recognising new offences to meet modern needs of the society. With the continuous evaluation of laws, the effectiveness and relevancy of such reformations can ensure justice to all.

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Synergising Health and Environmental Sustainability: A Study of the Meghalaya State Pollution Control Board's Role in Achieving the United Nations SDG 3 and SDG 13 in Industrial Areas

Altricia Synrem* and Dr. Md. Nazeer Hussain**

Introduction

The innovation of industrial technology has, on the one hand, led to an improvement in the standard of living and, on the other, adversely affected the environment by causing global warming that subsequently contributed to climate change worldwide. With time, global warming, largely caused by pollution, is escalating, adversely affecting all species, particularly human health. Pollution in any form hampers the ecology, and in industrial areas, the emission of hazardous waste into the air and water, exposure of people to toxic air, etc., cause detrimental illnesses.

Pollution is the major contributor to all the environmental factors leading to illnesses and early death, with low and middle-income countries witnessing more than 95 per cent of deaths spawned by air pollution.¹ Pollutants emerging from industries constitute what is generally referred to as industrial pollution. Pollutants from industries are contributors to global warming through the burning of coal and other fossil fuels that release Greenhouse Gases (GHGS) like methane, carbon dioxide, etc., to the atmosphere, causing climate change.²

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Inhabitants of industrial areas are exposed to hazardous air and water pollutants, resulting in various health problems such as cancer and cardiovascular diseases. Pollution prevention is essential to minimise environmental destruction and health hazards and to reduce financial expenses. A sine qua non for curtailment of pollution is the application of approaches to pollution prevention, such as in pollution-generating activities in the industrial sectors, and modifying production processes to produce less waste ³

Considering that good health and well-being of all ages are essential to sustainable development, the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGS) sought to minimise the number of deaths and diseases from dangerous chemicals and air, water, and soil contaminants.⁴ The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development reflects the plan of the United Nations Member States in 2015 to herald a sustainable future for everyone.⁵ An important emphasis laid by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is that development has to balance social, economic, and environmental sustainability.⁶ The SDGS require a concerted effort from all nations to address climate change and environmental degradation, among other challenges. The growing significance of Sustainable Development has enhanced the gravity of environmental governance. Environmental governance takes cognisance of the environment in decision-making and considers political and economic life as a segment of the environment, thereby upholding sustainability as the principal consideration in administering all activities.⁷

In India, the prevalence of pollution and the need to control it have led to the constitution of Pollution Control Boards at the Central and State levels by the Central government and State governments, respectively. In addition, the Government of India (GoI) provides innumerable.

Policies on clean air and water are being enforced in the country. The GoI, since February 2014, has been surveilling industrial emissions and pollutants in water bodies through the Online Continuous Emission/Effluents Monitoring Systems (OCEMS).⁸

The Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) was set up in September 1974. Constituted under the Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1974 (Water Act 1974 hereafter) and the Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1981 (Air Act 1981 hereafter), it has also been endowed with powers and functions such

as the promotion of cleanliness of water sources in the country through reduction and control of water pollution and enhancement of air quality along with abatement of air pollution in the country.⁹ The onus for the enactment of legislation for the prevention of environmental pollution falls on the CPCB and the State Pollution Control Boards (SPCB).¹⁰ The CPCB in India, in its efforts at tackling industrial pollution, is monitoring the industrial sector whereby industries are required to install Effluent Treatment Plants (ETPS) for removing pollutants from wastewater and chimneys or stacks with filters for collecting harmful particles.¹¹ The Board advises the Central Government on preventing and controlling air and water pollution. Most importantly, the CPCB gives pieces of advice to the SPCBs and gives technical support to them.

The SPCB, being a statutory body, functions under the direction of the CPCB for the preservation of the environment by carrying out enacted laws and regulations within the particular State, such as:

1. Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1981,
2. Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1974, and
3. Environment Protection Act 1986.¹²

To give effect to one of its objectives, i.e., to foster sustainable development for the country's economic growth, coupled with ecological preservation and social equity, the SPCBs ensure that businesses can proceed with their activities only after obtaining the green signal in the form of authorisation from the SPCB of the concerned State.¹³

The emerging complaints about the inadequate enforcement of environmental regulations by the SPCB led the GoI introduce fresh regulations in October 2024. One critical aspect is particularly the appointment of chairpersons of the Boards entrusted with the responsibility of enforcing the Water Act 1974 and the Air Act 1981. In this regard, as per the guidelines of the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC), GoI, Politicians will not be entitled to these important positions.¹⁴

Industrial Pollution in Meghalaya

Meghalaya, a State in North-eastern India, is gifted with natural resources like granite, coal, sillimanite, and limestone. The presence of these resources has helped the State become industrially viable. Since the 1960s, the Mawmluh Cherra Cements Limited (MCCL),

located in East Khasi Hills District set the momentum for establishing industries in the region. However, due to the decreasing productivity of the factory and other factors, the Government of Meghalaya closed the factory permanently in December 2024.¹⁵

At present, Ri Bhoi District has the Byrnihat Industrial Park and the Umiam Industrial Area, making it the major industrial hub of the State. Byrnihat Industrial Park has various factories such as Steel, Ferro-Alloy, Breweries, etc and Umiam Industrial Area has factories such as of Cement, Carbide, etc. East Jaintia Hills district, home of cement and coke factories is another crucial industrial area in Meghalaya.

Meghalaya is not an exception to industrial areas that emerged as contributors to pollution, i.e., air, water, and noise pollution, as in other parts of the country. The damaging repercussions of industrial contaminants have invited criticisms from the residents of the area as well as from civil society organisations. Complaints have therefore arisen against the increasing pollution, particularly in Byrnihat in Ri Bhoi District, and Sutnga Elaka in East Jaintia Hills District, where industries are concentrated.

According to the Central Pollution Control Board Air Quality Index published on October 28, 2024, air quality in Byrnihat is poor with an Index value of 219, the prominent pollutant is PM10.¹⁶ The air quality in Khliehriat, East Jaintia Hills as of 29th October 2024 is moderate with PM2.5 concentration in Khliehriat currently being 6.4 times the WHO annual air quality guideline value.¹⁷

Regardless of constitutional provisions such as the Water Act of 1974, the Air Act of 1981, and the Environment Protection Act of 1986, industrial pollution still poses a health problem to industrial area dwellers. This calls for better implementation of policies enabling the people to enjoy the right to a healthy atmosphere which is a vital component of the right to life under Article 21 of the Indian Constitution. The continued persistence of industrial pollutants also indicates the lack of adherence to environmental ethics where consideration for fellow beings is at the core. Therefore, it is expected that the private stakeholders should work closely with the Board to mitigate pollution by adopting all the norms laid down by it while the Board should also ensure the strict adherence to the norms by the private stakeholders.

Health Implications in Major Industrial Areas of Meghalaya

A common perception considers that ecological degradation impacts negatively over climate change and consequently affects people's health. One of the major causes of climate change is industrial pollution. In Meghalaya, as in other parts of the country, the fallout of industrial contaminants incurs the health challenges that people are suffering in the major industrial areas. In recent times, the problem aggravated as was evident from the protest movements launched by the people in the region.

In February 2024, the traditional Village Heads of Umrasong and Nongsning villages in Meghalaya's East Jaintia Hills filed a petition to the Meghalaya State Pollution Control Board (MSPCB) to shut down illegal Coke Oven Plants alleging environmental and health risks. On 15th February 2024, residents of these two villages opposed the functioning of illegal Coke Oven Plants in the area as contaminants emitted from the Plants posed serious causes of respiratory problems. Besides, they also pointed out that the coke plants have polluted the source of drinking water.¹⁸

Over the years, pollution has been a serious problem affecting Byrnihat region especially air and water pollution resulting in environmental deterioration. The latest findings from studies conducted by the MSPCB showed alarmingly high levels of pollutants in the air and water bodies in Byrnihat with Particulate Matter (PM2.5 and PM10) being considerably above the permissible limits. Besides, the MSPCB found that the nearby rivers and groundwater are contaminated with harmful substances impairing drinking water sources and agriculture.¹⁹

In September 2024 the Khasi Student's Union (KSU) objected to the proposed expansion of Star Cement Limited's mining lease and the setting-up of a new Cement Plant and Power Plant by Meghatop Cement Company Private Limited in East Jaintia Hills. The reason propagated behind the resistance was the contamination of the Lukha and Lunar rivers which made the water unsafe for drinking.²⁰

Four organizations in East Jaintia Hills District, the Hynñiewtre National Youths Front, Hynñiewtre Achik National Movement, Ri Jaiñtia Youth Federation and Hynñiewtre National Youth Movement wrote to the MSPCB in October 2024, opposing the setting-up of a new Cement Plant in Wahiajer region referring to environmental deprivation and health concerns. They objected that the cement factories operating in the area had contaminated water bodies like the Lukha and Lunar rivers.²¹

Besides, the Jaiñtia Women Council (JWC), United Youth Organisation (UYO), and All Jaiñtia Environment Organisation (AJEO) in October 2024 opposed the establishment of a Cement Factory and wrote to the MSPCB for the same concerns. The residents of the region too reflected the devastating impact that the cement factories have on the environment and health of the people and that the existing factories posed health problems due to air and noise pollution emanating from them.²²

Analysis of Primary Data on Health Implications in Meghalaya

For the present study, the researcher conducted a survey in the region where most of the industries are concentrated in Meghalaya viz., Byrnihat Industrial Park, Umiam Industrial Area in Ri Bhoi District, and Sutnga Elaka in East Jaintia Hills District. To gain a better understanding of the undesirable effects of industrial pollution on the health of the people, a total Sample Size of 150 respondents was selected based on a simple random sampling method from these three regions. To solicit the opinion of the residents on the vexed issue, 60 residents of Byrnihat, 40 residents of Umiam and 50 residents of Sutnga Elaka respectively were taken as samples.

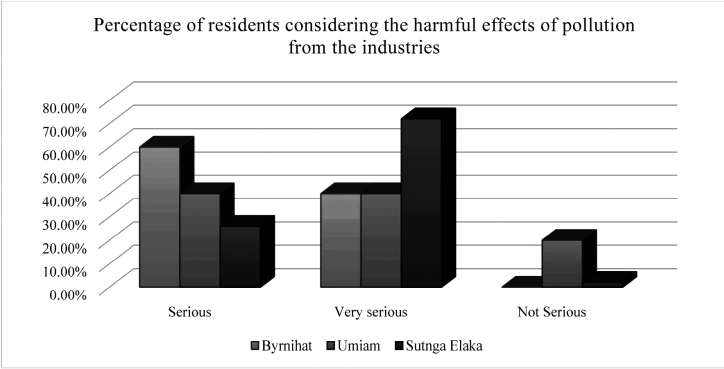
A questionnaire was drafted considering the severity of health implications, especially air and water pollution and its impacts on the elderly, women and children. The researcher also sought to know the kinds of diseases that popped out due to flagrant contamination of air and water in the region.

The primary data collected from the respondents of Byrnihat Industrial Park, Umiam Industrial Area in Ri Bhoi District, and Sutnga Elaka in East Jaintia Hills District has been analyzed carefully with the help of suitable tools to find the comprehensive percentage and average of the responses. The related opinions are reflected in the ensuing pages to substantiate the objectives of the study.

Specimen 1: Harmful Effects of Pollution from Industries

The researcher attempted to explore the overall harmful effects of industrial pollution on the health of the people with three different matrices viz., Serious, Very Serious and Not Serious from the respective area of Byrnihat, Umiam and Sutnga Elaka.

Figure 1: Harmful Effects of Pollution from Industries



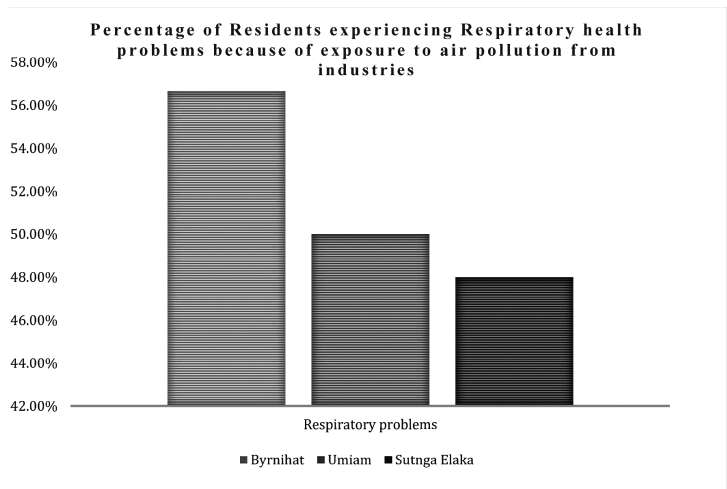
Source: Primary data collected from the field by the researcher during the year 2024

Discussion: The responses with a mixed trend reflect that in the major industrial areas of Meghalaya, industrial contaminants are hampering the environmental safety and health of the people. In Sutnga Elaka of East Jaintia Hills district which is the home to coke and cement factories, the undermining effect of pollution is very serious where 72% of residents believe that the problem needs immediate and grave respite. Byrnihat and Umiam are being placed in a very critical position as far as pollution levels with 40% of residents believing it very serious. The severity of industrial pollution in Byrnihat is at stake with 60% of residents believing it serious posing decisive challenges while Umiam shows a bit of relief with 20% of respondents also believing that the issue is not so serious.

Specimen 2: Industrial Air Pollution and Respiratory Troubles

During the interaction with the respondents, the researcher explained the menace of air pollution prevailing in industrial areas and attempted to know the difficulties they were facing with the respiratory system respectively in Byrnihat, Umiam and Sutnga Elaka.

Figure 2: Industrial Air Pollution and Respiratory Troubles



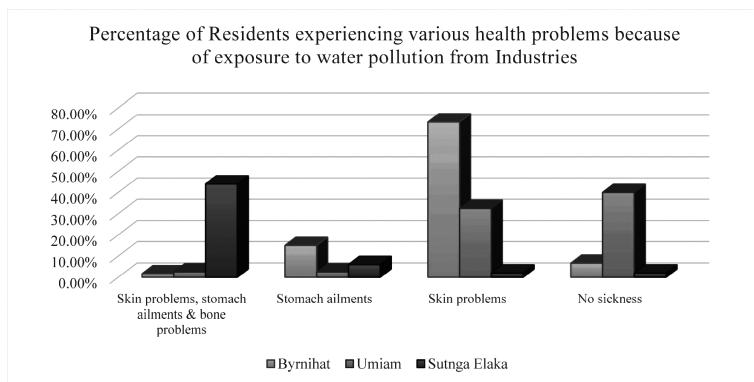
Source: Primary data collected from the field by the researcher during the year 2024

Discussion: The majority of Industries in the main industrial hubs are associated with air pollution. Industrial emissions deteriorate the air quality and negatively contribute to climate change. Consequently, climate change has far-reaching complications for human health. Particularly with prolonged exposure to contaminants, respiratory problems extensively impact health and this is a matter of grave concern. In the study area, Byrnihat shows the highest rate of respiratory problems with 56% of respondents followed by 50% in Umiam and 48% in Sutnga Elaka due to industrial pollution.

Specimen 3: Health Impacts of Industrial Water Pollution

The researcher attempted to explore the impact of water pollution due to industrial contaminants in the regions with various indices where the respondents reflected their concerns in three categories viz., (a) those having the problem of skin, stomach ailments as well as bone problems (b) those only having stomach ailments (c) those only having skin problems and (d) those having no sickness.

Figure 3: Health Impacts of Industrial Water Pollution



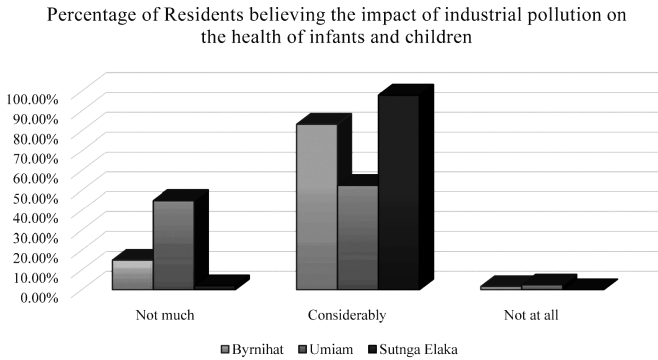
Source: Primary data collected from the field by the researcher during the year 2024

Discussion: One of the negative fallouts of industrial pollution is the effluents from industries that contaminate the water in and around the industrial sites. Exposure to polluted and dirty water hampers the human body and can cause health effects, especially stomach ailments such as dysentery, typhoid, cholera, etc. Water pollution is also linked with skin and bone problems. The result is highly shocking for Sutnga Elaka with 44% of respondents suffering from various stomach ailments as well as skin and bone problems. Byrnihat with 73% of respondents shows high trends of skin problems while Umiam shows 32% of respondents in this category. A bit of relief is observed in Umiam with 40% of respondents free from any kind of ailments due to water pollution. It is earnestly required that the industries in these regions must adopt green technologies and there should be proper treatment of effluents before they are discharged into water courses to mitigate the impact of pollution on the health of residents.

Specimen 4: Health Implication on Infants and Children

Infants and children are often at risk of pollution especially by the emission of industries. The researcher attempted to examine the impact of industrial pollution on the health of infants and children with three matrices viz., not much, considerably and not at all.

Figure 4: Health Implication on Infants and Children



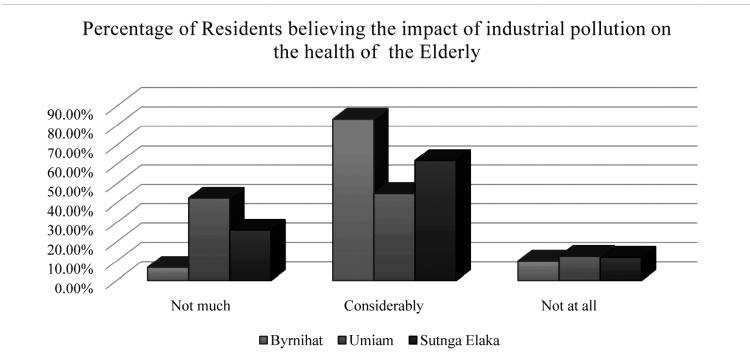
Source: Primary data collected from the field by the researcher during the year 2024

Discussion: In any society, infants and children are considered a vulnerable lot, especially near industrial hubs. They are in the growing stage and their immune system is much weaker than that of adults. This makes them more susceptible to pollution-related diseases like respiratory health problems and stomach ailments. Besides, exposure to air pollutants affects the cognitive development of children. The result found from these regions was highly deplorable with regard to infants and children. The Sutnga Elaka records the highest vulnerability of 98% health risk of infants and children due to industrial pollution followed by Byrnihat with 83% and Umiam with 52% responses. The health implications of air pollutants on infants and children are more compounded in industrial areas where pollutants aggravate health ailments.

Specimen 5: Health Issues of the Elderly near Industrial Hubs

The researcher interacted with the people from the study area to explore the concern of health issues on the elderly and the aged due to industrial pollution with three indices viz., not much, considerably, and not at all.

Figure 5: Health Issues of the Elderly near Industrial Hubs



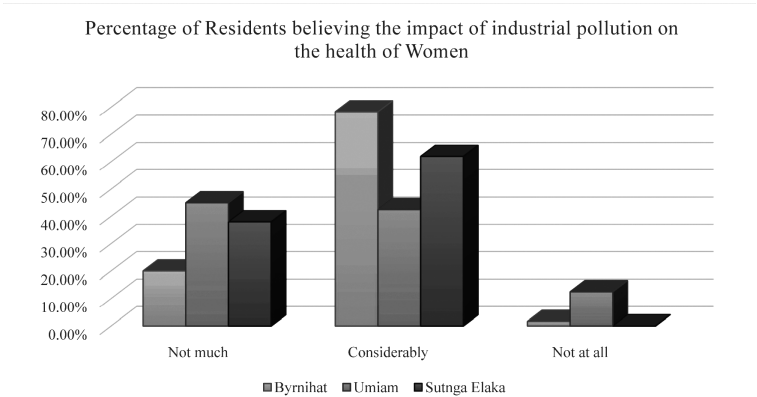
Source: Primary data collected from the field by the researcher during the year 2024

Discussion: Industrial pollutant poses an undesirable problem to the health of the elderly and the aged as they are more vulnerable to health illnesses because of weak immune systems, particularly with health issues associated with pollution. Exposure to high levels of particulate matter affects their physical and mental health due to the weakened resistant capability. Contaminated water also makes the elderly more prone to gastrointestinal problems besides other diseases. 83% of respondents from Byrnihat highlighted the considerable risk to the aged and elderly people followed by 62% from Sutnga Elaka and 45% from Umiam industrial areas. Those with prevailing health impairments are at greater risk necessitating better health measures. With climate change, more diseases are on the rise increasing the morbidity risk of the elderly.

Specimen 6: Health of Women and the Industrial Pollution

To ensure better health conditions for one of the significant sections of society, the researcher examined the issues faced by women in the study area with three matrices viz., not much, considerable, and not at all.

Figure 6: Health of Women and the Industrial Pollution



Source: Primary data collected from the field by the researcher during the year 2024

Discussion: In any society, women’s health protection is very crucial as they are the life-givers. Prevailing narratives indicate the bad effects of exposure to industrial contaminants on women’s reproductive health and hormonal balance. Byrnihat shows the highest rate of health issues with 78% of respondents believing that women are facing considerable health risks followed by Sutnga Elaka with 62%. Umiam shows a bit of relief with 45% of respondents believing that the risk is not much for women’s health. Unless there is an improvement in the situation, the health security of women will continue to be at risk.

Efforts to realize the United Nations SDG 3 and SDG 13 in Meghalaya

The United Nations in 2015 initiated the agenda to achieve 17 Sustainable Development Goals to be accomplished by 2030. Nations are to take initiatives in ensuring healthy lives, promoting well-being for all at all ages and addressing issues like climate change, poverty, injustice, etc.²³

The pressing issue of climate change has assumed significance, particularly with increasing pollution and found a place in discourses

worldwide. The growing climate change negatively impinges on people's health so the United Nations takes cognizance of this alarming situation and accordingly, many of the SDGs are devoted to environmental concerns. In industrial areas, where the health of the inhabitants is at stake, two Sustainable Development Goals, SDG 3 and SDG 13 are vital for realisation.

SDG 3 – Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages—Poor health endangers the rights of children to education, diminishes economic progress for men and women, and exacerbates poverty around the world. Sustainable development therefore accords great significance to the health and well-being of the general populace. Goal 3 intends to significantly reduce the number of illnesses and deaths caused by air, water, and soil pollution.²⁴

SDG 13 – Reducing climate and air pollutants, addressing deforestation and forest degradation, and supporting the move to low and emission economies - Anthropogenic industrial activities negatively impact climate change. SDG13 focuses on curtailing pollution and global warming.²⁵

The 28th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP28) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Paris Agreement was held in 2023 in Dubai, UAE. The event was a milestone as it focused on the relationship between climate and health with a host of initiatives taken namely, COP28 Health Day, the COP28 UAE Declaration on Climate and Health, the first Climate and Health Ministerial, and several official COP28 documents and outcomes reflecting on the bond between climate change and health.²⁶

The United Nations Climate Summit, COP29, was held in November 2024 in Baku, Azerbaijan. Among the key takeaways from the Conference, a crucial one was the emphasis laid on sincere commitments and actions for public-private partnerships to raise trillions of dollars to finance the shift to low-carbon economies.²⁷

In giving teeth to its commitment to realising the sustainable goals, particularly the threat of global warming, the Government of India initiated the National Action Plan for Climate Change (NAPCC) in 2008. Among the principles embodied in the plan, one crucial principle is the augmentation of a framework to protect groups in society who are more susceptible to climate change. The inauguration of the National Action Plan in 2008 exhibits India's enthusiastic

commitment to comply with the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.²⁸

To enhance the attempts at speeding up the achievement of SDGs in North East India, the Ministry of Development of North-eastern Region (MDoNER) partnered with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) on 22nd August 2023. The benefits that will be derived by the North Eastern States include technical support, particularly in the field of governance where new technologies are required, capacity building, monitoring, swift progress on the SDGs, and support to aspirational blocks and districts.²⁹

In its efforts to meet the objectives of the SDGs, the State has taken the following measures³⁰:

1. Meghalaya formed its Sustainable Development Goals Cell in March 2018.
2. The Sustainable Development Goals Monitoring Framework is also in place with 195 indicators.
3. An environment of health competition was encouraged among districts and scores were allotted to districts based on their performance.

Meghalaya also introduced the CM Catalytic Fund to districts for the Improvement of SDGs by assisting in giving financial aid to districts and entrusting power to the District Commissioners to implement projects as per the requirements. Improvement in the ranking of the State in the NITI Aayog SDG index from 25th rank in 2019-20 to 23rd rank in 2020-21 is a testimony of its persistence in the endeavours to realize the SDGs.³¹

Another important initiative in this direction to meet the challenges of climate change taken by the Government of Meghalaya is the establishment of the Meghalaya State Council on Climate Change & Sustainable Development. The Council reviewed the Meghalaya Climate Emergency & Green Growth Framework on August 17, 2024. Important decisions are taken here including measures to deal with the escalating climate crisis and to safeguard the environment. Along with the emphasis being laid on the climate crisis, the framework gave importance to the health sector due to the close affinity between climate change and health.³²

In September 2024, the Committee on Environment of the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly headed by Chairperson Shri Wailadmiki Shylla inspected a Coke Plant and Cement Plants in East

Jaintia Hills District to evaluate the impact of industrial activities on the environment. The Chairperson stressed the committee's role to make certain that industrial activities do not lead to environmental degradation.³³

Role of the Meghalaya State Pollution Control Board

The Meghalaya State Pollution Control Board (earlier known as the State Board for Prevention and Control of Water Pollution Meghalaya till 1988) was established on 16th November 1983 and headquartered in Shillong. It is entrusted with the responsibility of preventing and controlling water and air pollution as laid down in the Water Act, 1974 and the Air Act, 1981. Section 17 of both the Act of 1974 and 1981 sets out the function of the Board.³⁴

The Board's responsibilities include managing the general administration, coordinating with diverse agencies, formulating and executing policies about Acts and Rules, and conducting Public Awareness Programmes on pollution control and environmental protection. Besides, the key activities of the Board include monitoring the quality of ambient air, stack emissions, water and wastewater, inspection and guidance of industries and sites proposed for setting up of industries taking into consideration the protection of the environment. Issue of "Consents to Establish" and "Consents to Operate" in respect of industries, mining projects, specified developmental projects, municipal bodies, and health care facilities, etc. also forms an important activity of the Board. Besides, environmental training forms an important instrument in the Board's administrative system and reputed institutions and organizations in the State are provided with training by trainees of the Board. Officials of the Board regularly attend various trainings held in different parts of the country.³⁵

The Meghalaya State Pollution Board has been following the standards as prescribed by the Central Pollution Control Board. Over the years, it has rendered advice to the government of Meghalaya on pollution control activities to be undertaken in the State and it has made efforts to address the complaints received from inhabitants of industrial areas, especially on issues of air pollution emanating from industries. The Board has also over the years, helped industries through the provision of subsidies for installing pollution control devices. To set the ball rolling toward enhancing its commitment to control

pollution in the State, the Board set up a well-equipped State Laboratory in 1988 in the city of Shillong to analyze samples of air, water, waste-water, soil, and solid waste. The Government of Meghalaya has recognized the Laboratory of the Board as the “State Water and Air Laboratory”.³⁶

Management of noise pollution is also a crucial task of the Board. It not only identifies the sources of noise pollution from industries but also implements rules concerning industries, monitors ambient noise in Industrial/ Commercial/ Residential areas, and keeps a check on the compliance of the Standards by industries. Regarding efforts at controlling industrial pollution, specific instructions are laid down by the Board for Industries and they are to appropriately maintain the installed air pollution control devices to effectively control particles emitted from the plants and to adopt measures for the reduction of fugitive emissions. Regular inspections of industries are undertaken by the officials of the Board to ensure compliance with pollution control norms and the National Ambient Air Quality Standards are required to be maintained by the industries not only within but also in the adjoining areas of the industries. An important initiative of the Board is the introduction of the Online Monitoring of Emission and Effluent of the highly polluting industries falling under the 17 categories of polluting industries as notified by the Government of India and the Board has also carried out the Court orders issued on related matters.³⁷

In 2022, after the Board detected that in East Jaintia Hills District, 29 coke plants were functioning unlawfully, it directed their closure on 6th March of the same year.³⁸ Besides, the Board on 7th March 2022 issued a public notice preventing any industry from being established or operated without the prior permission of the Board. This is in compliance with Sections 25 and 26 of the Water Act 1974 and Section 21 of the Air Act 1981.³⁹ Due to the persistent violation of the Board’s directives by industries in controlling pollution; the installation of CCTVs has been made compulsory. This was made effective from October 27th, 2023 to ensure that industries switch on their pollution control devices.⁴⁰ Industries in the country must conform to all the directives and regulations as laid down by the respective Pollution Boards. Byrnihat located in Ri Bhoi district of Meghalaya is home to many industries. It was recently found that 6

industries in the area neither adequately installed the Online Continuous Emission Monitoring System nor properly operated the PCD to regulate Particulate Matter (PM10 and PM2.5), Sulphur Dioxide (SO₂), and Nitrogen Dioxide (NO₂) emissions within permissible limits. Accordingly, on September 3rd, 2024, these 6 industries were shut down by the Board and they would be allowed to resume working only after due compliance with all environmental regulations.⁴¹

In December 2024, the Meghalaya State Pollution Control Board issued closure notices to five industrial units in Umiam industrial area for open burning violating the National Green Tribunal (NGT) directives. Besides, the Board also imposed a fine of Rs 25,000 each on the industries for air pollution violations.⁴²

The aforementioned initiatives of the Board highlight its increasing commitment to controlling pollution in industrial areas and thereby protecting people's health. However, more action is expected from the Board to fulfill the aspirations of the inhabitants of industrial areas.

Major Findings from the Field Study

The researcher came across various hurdles to comprehend the better understanding of the impacts of industrial pollution on the health of various stakeholders in the region. Despite policy loopholes and monitoring processes, careful observation of the opinions of inhabitants enhances the possibility of reducing the impacts of industrial pollution. However, the impression from the field study needs a mention for a proper understanding of industrial pollution and to minimize its health effects on the inhabitants. The major findings of the present field study from Byrnihat Industrial Park, Umiam Industrial Area in Ri Bhoi District, and Sutnga Elaka in East Jaintia Hills District of Meghalaya are as follows:

- The overall harmful effects due to industrial pollution highly necessitate Byrnihat of Ri Bhoi District and Sutnga Elaka of East Jaintia Hills District very serious concern. While Umiam of Ri Bhoi District received a bit of relief with a small section believing the issue is not so serious.
- As far as respiratory troubles, more than half of the population in Sutnga Elaka and nearly half of the population in Byrnihat and Umiam are facing problems due to flagrant air pollution.

- The menace of water pollution incurs various stomach ailments such as dysentery, typhoid, cholera, etc. along with skin and bone problems in Sutnga Elaka at a high rate. Byrnihat is at high risk of skin problems due to water contamination by industrial discharge. Umiam too couldn't be considered highly safe as less than half of the population is free from any kind of disease due to water pollution.
- The impact of industrial pollution on infants and children makes them highly vulnerable especially in Sutnga Elaka evenly spread in the entire population. Byrnihat is not an exception with 83% while more than half of the population of Umiam is also at stake.
- In case of health issues of elderly and aged people, Byrnihat is at high risk amid industrial pollution followed by Sutnga Elaka while Umiam with less than half of the elderly population under risk.
- Women and their reproductive health is often a boon to society but amid industrial pollution, it is highly affected. The overall health of women in Byrnihat is considerably at risk due to industrial pollution followed by Sutnga Elaka. Umiam shows a bit of relief with regard to the health of half of the population of women who are not at risk.

Suggestions and Way Ahead

Looking into the severity and consequences of the issues under study, the State Pollution Control Board must come up sincerely to ameliorate the larger concern of society. Board must deal strictly with its policies of "Consents to Establish" and "Consents to Operate" before the establishment of any industry in the region violators of which must be punished heavily. Board must ensure that the industries follow all the guidelines maintaining proper infrastructure, functional effluent treatment plants and working chimneys and stacks with filters. Industries must adopt green technologies for the disposal and discharge of waste and by-products. It must be ensured that the installation of air pollution control devices must comply with the standard norms. Meghalaya being a natural beauty, Board must take into account the traditional methods of forest conservation, water sustainability and environmental protection while permitting any industry to operate in the region. Besides, civil society must work as a watchdog to monitor

unethical practices contaminating air, water and the environment not following the Board's policies while operating the industries.

One of the biggest loopholes, the lack of public awareness creates immense hurdles to realize the safety and protection of the environment. Board must organize larger awareness programs on pollution control and environmental protection in collaboration with the District Commissioner to utilize the funds for the realization of SDGs in the region. Timely and regular training of the officials is a mandate for the proper discharge of their duties to maintain sustainability in the industrial region.

The Centre for Science and Environment conducted a study named *Turnaround* in 2009 to understand the constraints of State Pollution Control Boards. Suggestions have come up that the regulation of industries, the highly technical nature of the works, and the requirement for proper implementation of policies and programmes for pollution mitigation require enhancing the qualities of officials and formulating a better strategy for improving the environmental regulatory body in the country.⁴³ For the successful functioning of Pollution Boards, it is highly required that the medical community, civil society, and academia should be represented in them. Pollution boards have been functioning in the country for many years since their establishment. However, the functioning of the boards is also accompanied by challenges such as insufficient resources and staff, inadequate public awareness and participation, and the requirement for strict regulatory frameworks in addressing pollution issues. A report submitted to the National Green Tribunal came out recently that the percentage of vacant posts in all State Pollution Control Boards and Committees accounts for more than 50%. This workforce shortage stands in the way of the nationwide realisation of pollution control.⁴⁴

During 2019-20, the Central Pollution Control Board conducted a Performance Audit of SPCBs/ PCCs on matters concerning the effectiveness of regulatory mechanisms, and environmental monitoring, appointing both scientific and technical manpower, lab infrastructure etc. The Observations from the Audit were that other than the SPCBs in States and PCCs like Lakshadweep, the majority of the SPCBs/ PCCs do not encounter financial challenges. Moreover, the SPCBs/ PCCs of the North Eastern States have inadequate infrastructure, law enforcers, and trained staff. Among many recommendations, some important ones are that the state should upgrade the laboratories and there should be the inclusion of the current aspects of preservation of

resources, sustainability of development, and the objectives of environmental regulations of the country in the environmental policies.⁴⁵

Conclusion:

As elsewhere in industrial areas of the country, in Meghalaya too the role of the State Pollution Control Board over the years is commendable. Solutions to both air and water pollution issues caused by industries require prompt attention. Particularly as air quality in some of the industrial vicinities particularly in Byrnihat unfolds to be moderate or poor, and unhealthy for sensitive groups, the Board is working on the imposition of effective policies and increasing relevant awareness programs.⁴⁶ As elsewhere in the country, in Meghalaya too strengthening the environmental regulatory authorities is highly essential to enable them to realize the objectives envisioned for them at the time of their establishment. It is required that better policies should be framed and implemented, particularly with air pollution control and water pollution control as both air and water pollution have disastrous effects on people's health. Currently, the Government of Meghalaya is planning to convert 134 acres of land in Byrnihat to come up with a new industrial estate to prepare the groundwork for its 10-billion-dollar economy road map.⁴⁷

As Meghalaya is continuing on its economic growth journey, a challenge in the form of industrial pollution is accompanying this journey. Industrial contaminants impacting the ecology and health of people necessitate amelioration of the efforts of the concerned authorities to sincerely work towards the actualization of SDG3 and SDG13. With six years remaining for nations to realize the fulfillment of the UN 2030 Agenda, the Climate change crisis needs to be dealt with effectively if human beings can live happily and a healthy environment can be bequeathed to posterity.

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Personal Laws, Gender Inequality and Empowerment: A Review

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Introduction

India is a country famous for its diversity in various aspects; especially religiously. By the widely held religious diversity of the Indian population, including men and women; special religious rules are best known for paying due respect to the religious beliefs and practices of the individual. However, this multicultural, multicultural society comes with its own equitable share of gender-based inequalities that provide fewer rights for women compared to men. Succession, marriage, adoption or divorce. Each religion brings its own unique set of rules. However, the common denominator between diversity is obvious, namely that male domination opens the way to patriarchal society with the support of all Indian legal systems. It should be noted, however, that amendments to many of these surgeries were made in these personal laws, which seemed to completely undermine women's fundamental human rights because of the changing times. However, the same cannot be said of all religions, and even if it is a personal law where change has taken place; changes are not enough to begin with. A typical example of the two situations above can be seen by making a brief study of the comparisons between personal laws followed by Hindus and Muslims respectively. While Hindu humanitarian law has actually been subjected to change instead of changing times, there are many additional changes needed to build a better India that provides equality and fair practices for both men and women. On the contrary, the personal laws of Muslims have so far retained their traditional beliefs established long ago that they are

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firmly opposed to any form of change. A variety of personal and social variations according to their chosen beliefs and practices. Due to the lack of personal rules for Sikhs, Buddhists, and Jains, they follow the Hindu personal laws. Hindu Law on Pollution and Retention, 1956; Hindu Marriage Act, 1955; Hindu Recognition and Preservation Act, 1956; and the Hindu Succession Amendment Act, 2005 are just a few examples of the laws of Hinduism that are followed by the majority of people in the country. Repeal of the Islamic Marriage Act, 1986; Islamic Law on the Protection of Women and Divorce Rights and the Shariat Act are some of the laws that fall within the confines of Islamic personal law. The word gender describes the social and cultural perceptions of most people. Gender is not based on biological factors. Sociologists describe gender disparities as the division of status, power and prestige that women and men have in groups, collections and social order. Women need to hear about such a huge amount of inconsistencies that create such a huge number of obstacles in their journey. Women feel inadequate and helpless in the light of the fact that the childhood of young girls is made so that they do not raise their voices against such divisions. Despite the fact that the legislature has made efforts in an effort to uplift the status of women, there is a need to change people's thinking in order to give women confidence in their abilities.

The Origin of the Concept of Religious Personal Laws

India's legal system is influenced by a common legal system - the remnants of British colonialism. Within the colony, the normal environmental communication between the legal entity and its general public was severely disrupted by this study. The Indians formed a legal framework based on the needs of a completely different society, England. However, while the laws in England have provided or amended most of these legitimate ideas, India is continuing the "assembly" of pioneer laws. The concept of religious law is one of those ideas. Gradually, legal reforms were introduced, but despite these changes, the idea that religious law does not change is still valid. The practice of applying the rules of religious communities in personal matters was considered to be the preservation of religious law, in part because of the language used. Surprisingly, British policies determined what should be placed as a personal matter. One thing that has been noted of many religious laws is that women have fewer rights than men. The

state has specifically used a conflict of religious sanctity with these laws but at various times introduced radical changes. Most of the progress has been made in the Hindu Laws but changes in the rules of small networks have been very stagnant. For example, in 2005, in the Hindu Succession Act, it was proposed to keep in mind the ultimate goal of making girls equal to police officers; in any case, suspension by still leaves women less privileged than men. In these particular cases where the gender inequality of Indian women is likely to be achieved by introducing a common family law rule that will lead to the acquisition of gender equality law as a rule of law.

Women in Different Religious Personal Laws

There are various religions such as Hinduism, Islam, Sikhs, Christians, Persians, Buddhists, Jews, and Jains who follow various religious and social laws. There is no common law in India. Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains follow the rules of the Hindu man. There are different laws such as the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, The Hindu Succession Amendment Act, 2005, The Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act, 1956 and the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956 governing the laws of the Hindu people. Similarly, the personal rules of Islam are also based on the proclamation of the Holy Quran governing Muslims. The Shariat Act, 1937, The Dissolution of Muslim Marriages Act, 1986, The Muslim Women (Protection and Rights on Divorce) Act, 1986 etc. are personal Islamic law. Depending on these rules one can see the difference in personal rules. The status of women is not good in personal laws as there is bias against the patriarchal society.

Women in Hindu Law

‘Dharmashastra’ is the basis of Hindu law and other sources such as the Vedas, Smritis, Shrutis, etc. The integration of Hindu law began in 1995, however women were not considered equal to men. These principles of discrimination still exist, some of which are as follows

- Child custody: A woman gives birth to a child but in the case of adoption a Hindu married woman was not entitled to adopt a child on her own, even with her husband’s consent. To *Malti Ray Chowdhury v. Sudhindranath Majumdar* (AIR, 2007), the deceased woman had given birth to a woman’s child while she (the deceased) was married. The physical delivery of the child and the adoption event were made in the presence of the

deceased's husband, without any objection, however, the court held that the adoption was invalid. The court noted: "Adoption should be taken literally or legally by a man in the event of your marriage, not a wife. In other words, the wife does not have the power to take even the husband's permission..." (AIR, 2007).

- Women's right to housing: Female heirs of Hindu male property cannot apply for the separation of the intestinal tract where the intestinal family resides until male heirs choose to separate their shares. A female heir has the right to remain in the house only if she is unmarried, divorced or divorced, or widowed. A widow's daughter loses her right to remain with her when she remarries. In *Hira Dei vs Bodhi Sahu and Others* (AIR, 1954), Hira devi became the victim of such a law as she was denied her residency when she remarried. Therefore, local law repeats traditional patriarchal ideas towards women. (AIR, 1954),
- Sequence of male and female intestinal property: In the archives, the son, grandson and son receive the property right by birth. No woman can be a member of a coparcenary, so this promotes inequality between men and women. Under the Hindu Succession Act, the intestinal tract of a man and a woman defines it differently. In the absence of children, the inheritance inherited from the parents of the female child passes to the heirs of the father. If the woman did not have children then the property acquired by her husband or father-in-law would go to the husband's estate. In the case of personal property of a girl, the gift, or property acquired under a valid will go to her children and her husband. In the absence of children and the husband, the property focuses on her husband's heirs and then on her parents. Once again, the notions of gender equality can be seen. The Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005, amended Section 6 of the Hindu Succession Act, 1956, which allows daughters of the deceased equal rights and sons. In the case of copyrighted property, or where two persons inherit equally between themselves, the daughter and son face the same debts and disabilities. To *Krishan Gupta and Anr. V. Rajinder Nath & Co HUF & Ors.*, "The Court held that in the event of a man's death in the

bowels, the daughter becomes a copyist and receives an equal share of the sons. Inherited from her husband's estate, but her husband may transfer the property to a third party and he will not be able to dispute it. It was held in *Vimalben Ajitbhai Patel*. and if the woman is unable to feed herself. By his parents, children, or places. If a woman marries someone else in that situation, she cannot get maintenance from the law. If the widow's parents are unable to support their daughter only then she gets legal maintenance. The law places an obligation on the heirs of the husband (third party) to support the widow."

- Maintenance law: There is no way to guarantee that the husband will always pay. Since it is not the police or that authority that will not help the abandoned wife. In such cases he will have to go to court again, which is not an easy way out for a woman. In India, most women do not receive maintenance in order to continue living a better life.

Women in Islamic Law

Islam means calm, and obedient. According to Agnes, Islam means peace and humility. "Shari'ah is an Arabic word meaning" Path to be followed, "which refers to the many legal penalties known as Islamic law. The main source of Islamic law is the Quran, which Muslims believe to be the word of God. Therefore, the Quran is supported by other sources to form the basis of Sharia. Shariah is the result of what people understand through those sacred proclamations. The cardinal view is different from what we have brought in the way of Shari'ah.

- Age for marriage: Islam has not set the age limits for marriage. The age of marriage depends on maturity, which can vary. In *Yunusbhai Usmanbhai Shaikh v. State of Gujarat (SCC, 2015)*, Justice JB Padiwala said, bili, able to marry. "So, marriage is more dependent on the biological aspects of girls than on the most astonishing age.
- Witnesses at the time of marriage: Among the Sunnis, a proposal and acceptance must be made before the hearing of two adult male or one male and two female witnesses. In *Abdullah v. Beepathu on April (ILR, 1921)*, the Court ruled, "Marriage was illegal as there were only two women witnesses. That means that according to the above law one man is equal

to two women. A woman is part of a man who is nothing without total discrimination” (ILR, 1921).

- Purpose of marriage: The tendency of marriage to men. The purpose of marriage is to provide comfort and happiness to the person, to prevent pornography and to rape and produce children. It is clear that women are treated as objects that are used to the liking and liking of men.
- The right to consent to marriage: A woman has no rights, even when her husband is chosen and in her determination. She cannot even express her desire to marry someone as she is considered inferior to a man. Whatever his family decides for him is considered very important.
- Mahr: Marriage is like an agreement in personal Islamic law. During marriage mahr (considered a gift) is given on the girl's side and there is no such law on the boy's side. There is no doubt that there are gender differences here.
- Polygamy: In Islam, polygamy is a contentious issue. A Muslim man can marry no. of wives but not more than 4 but a Muslim woman can marry only one man and if she marries another man, she is obliged to obtain polygamy under Section 494 of IPC and the interest in that marriage is illegal. Article 494 states: “Remarriage in the lifetime of a husband or wife. - Anyone, if they have a living husband or wife, marries in any state where the marriage is void because it occurred during the lifetime of that man or woman, may be liable to imprisonment for any term of up to seven years, and shall be liable to a fine. the person whose marriage was declared to be absent from the Court of competent jurisdiction, or to any other person who entered into a marriage contract during the lifetime of the ex-husband or wife, if that spouse, at that he is alive during that time as long as the person entering into the next marriage, before the marriage is solemnized, inform the person to whom the marriage has been made of the actual state of facts as he or she knows.” In *State of Bombay v. Narasu Appa Mali* (AIR, 1952), Chagla, CJ seen - “There is no doubt that Muslims have been excluded from the application of the Act in question. Even section 494, the Penal Code, which makes the lump a crime, applies to Parsis, to Christians and others, but not to Muslim men because

polygamy is known as a legal institution where a Muslim man marries more than one wife.” (AIR, 1952) The idea of polygamy is that during pregnancy or menstruation it is better for a man to have another legally married woman than for other women. The one-man effect of increasing the institution of prostitution. This idea is extremely shameful and disrespectful to women and the general public as well.

- Maintenance: In the case of maintenance the divorced Muslim woman does not need to be cared for beyond the ‘Iddat’ period. A divorced woman has a legal right only to her mahr and to the maintenance period for days. In *Khurshid Khan v. Husnabanu Mahimood Shaikh* (1976), was found by the Court that - “the divorced wife is entitled to the mahr and that it is in accordance with the law for the period of payment of iddat days. A widow is also not responsible for the loss of her in-laws. A woman, who is divorced from her husband, cannot remarry, is not yet married to another person and has sex with him and after that divorces him.” (1976).
- Women’s share of the estate: In both schools, the male usually receives twice as much as his female counterpart. When a son and daughter inherit together, the son receives twice as much as his daughter. Husband receives 1/4 share and wife 1/8 shares where there is a child and if there is no child 1/2th and 1/4 respectively.

Religious discrimination against women

2018 has been a historic year for women entering the traditional male regions. In February, the IAF pilot became the first Indian woman to fly alone and three months later, in May, a group of six Indian Navy members became the first Indian women to travel around the world. Their unique success landed in a world-famous hall that already has more female pilots than any other, and where successful female politicians, sports celebrities and senior executives are now less attractive for a second look. But there is one glass roof that prevents women from outside - religion. The doors of a large number of saints are still closed to women. This castle is now a challenge. On September 28, the Supreme Court opened the way for women of all ages to enter the Ayyappa temple in Sabarimala, Kerala. Four out of five judges on the constitutional bench have ruled that the temple ban violates the

fundamental rights of Hindu women. These barriers to entry are a metaphor for what is organized by the patriarchal religion, which has been unchallenged for centuries. The patriarchs, or masculine power over women, continue in the religious sphere when it denies the independence or interdependence of women. In Hinduism, male gods are not perfect except for their females. However, women were considered unclean during menstruation and, therefore, were forbidden to go outside in kitchens and temples such as Sabarimala. In various ways, the practices of all the world's major religions reflect the natural order of things. The clergy are mainly men's groups. That is why the decision of the Supreme Court on September 28 is absurd, because it highlights the tense relationship between women and religion. The judgment of the four justices of the Supreme Court commended the end of 'religious unity by glorifying and honouring women as goddesses on the one hand and imposing strict sanctions on one another in matters of devotion'. This is one of a series of Supreme Court decisions upholding women's rights. Last August, a court ruled that three-fold talaq was illegal. Earlier this year, it was decided that the legitimacy of an older woman of her choice would not be questioned. In one landmark case, it upheld the right of daughters to claim an equal share in the property of their ancestors. Our cover story, 'Sexist Gods', looks at why men still call guns to all Indian religions and why religion discriminates against women. Our library of guest writers who have explored this unique religious patriarch - authors Pavan K Varma and Devdutt Pattanaik, historian Uma Chakravarti, historian Rakhambela Jalil, lawyer Flavia Agnes and women's rights activist Syeda Hameed - explain why. We also have profiles of women who have swum against religious radio. Mahant Devyagiri of the Lucknow temple in Mahakameshwar, the chief priest of the Hindu temple. Noorjehan Safia Niaz of Baratiya Muslim Mahila Andolan, who obtained a court order to allow women to visit the inner sanctuary of Haji Ali dargah of Mumbai, and Gulrukh Contractor Gupta, a Zoroastrian women's rights activist. I believe that if religion is to remain valid, it must be up-to-date. Different religions must show the community where they are made while adhering to their core beliefs. The emancipation of women and gender equality has been more than a century and still continues. Women make up half of the population and will not be denied their basic freedom in these modern years. Most important, they must have the freedom to choose. After all, if

women could fly fighter jets, they would certainly not be allowed to have the same access to places of worship as men, or to become priests. The world will be a better place for it.

Religious Personal Laws: obstacles in the way of women

We have seen that there are gender inequalities in our religious laws. In one way or another the religious laws of man promote a society governed by man for example in Islamic law marriages occur due to the consent of the guardians and there is no certain age of marriage. In the event that the first marriage takes place then there will no doubt be a lack of proper education. In our nation, it is considered that if a girl is not educated enough, she needs to be given more bribe money. In addition, this also increases domestic violence. Greed has taken place in personal religious rules and is now a way of participating in our society. Thousands of women die each year as a result of domestic violence. The reported mortality rate has risen since the last decade. Thousands more are injured and disabled because the husband, or the husband's family, is not satisfied with the dowry brought by the wife. In India, women are sometimes burned when their parents do not pay enough dowries when a girl gets married. This is often referred to as a "kitchen accident"; in 99% of these "kitchen accidents" a woman is killed. When women get divorced, women go into a state of loneliness. Loneliness continues to lead to psychological abuse. Divorce creates maintenance problems because there is no such maintenance law. Young marriage also leads to young children creating a negative motherhood and the death of the mother. Often, most social issues come from personal religious rules and gender inequality.

Conclusion

"Half of the people in India are also women. Women have always been discriminated against and suffer in silence. Self-sacrifice and self-denial are their positions and strengths and yet they have been subjected to injustice, inequality and discrimination," said Justice K. Rama Swamy. There are different religions and different laws, defined by the need for a particular religion. Personal religious laws have been shown to discriminate against women. There are notices of many similar discriminatory laws. For Muslims, the status of women is alarming, as Muslims adopt the rules of religion itself. It can be attributed to the establishment of patriarchy and the culture of feminism

in India. Women themselves consider it their destiny to rely on men. Women feel that it is their destiny to rely on men. In India, women are growing up to think that men are superior and that women are inferior. In India, we have various social laws that address gender equality but those laws do not work, they are only in the papers. It has rightly been said that religion is a matter of belief; belief is a matter of conscience, and freedom of conscience is at the heart of modern civilization. In a multi-religious country such as India which has elected a State, it is the right of every citizen to choose to be governed by the laws of the land in matters pertaining to them and it is the duty of the State to provide a family code. However, the Indian Parliament accepted the ambiguity due to political coercion. Personal religious rules oppress women. There is no doubt that men are superior to women. So, there should be the same rules for all religions, so that the position of women is improved. Education is a way for women to achieve equality, because whenever any placement puts the community in her lap education always plays a very important role in removing it from the ground. The need for the hour is to spread awareness and make people realize that men and women are equal.

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Unveiling the Tapestry of 'Mithila' and 'Maithili': Exploring the Interplay of Language, Culture, Geography, Economy, Education, and Social Dynamics through a Historical Lens

Dr. Sudipta Adhikary,* Dr. Paramita Bhattacharyya and Dr. Kaushik Banerjee*****

Introduction:

This fascinating investigation delves deep into the web of interrelationships between Mithila's language, culture, geography, economics, education, and social dynamics. This region, which includes portions of Bihar and Nepal, is steeped in history and is home to a diverse and intriguing culture. The Maithili language is the bedrock of the culture and the language that binds the people of this area together.

“जननी जन्मभूमिश्च स्वर्गादपि गरीयसी”
कौशिकीन्तु समारभ्य गण्डकीमधिगम्यवै।
योजनानि चतुर्विंश व्यायामः परिकीर्तितः॥
गङ्गा प्रवाहमारभ्य यावद्धैमवतम्बनम्।
विस्तारः षोडशप्रोक्तो देशस्य कुलनन्दन॥

अर्थात्:

पूर्व में कोसी से आरंभ होकर पश्चिम में गंडकी तक 24 योजन तथा
दक्षिण में गंगा नदी से आरंभ होकर उत्तर में हिमालय वन
(तराई प्रदेश) तक 16 योजन मिथिला का विस्तार है।

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It translates to “*From the Kosi River in the east to the Gandaki River in the west, a distance of 24 Yojana (1 Yojana = 13 km), and from the Ganges River in the south to the Himalayan Forest (Terai region) in the north, a distance of 16 Yojana.*”

Mithila's Rivers: Nurturing Lifelines and Shaping Landscapes:

The lands of Mithila are graced by a network of majestic rivers, each playing a vital role in the region's ecosystem. Mahananda, Gandak, Kosi, Bagmati, Kamala, Balan, and Budhi Gandak are among the prominent waterways that flow through this enchanting land. Originating in the southern foothills of the Himalayas, these rivers meander through Mithila, eventually finding their embrace in the sacred waters of the Ganges. While these rivers bring life and sustenance southern foothills of the Himalayas, these rivers meander through Mithila, eventually finding their embrace in the sacred waters of the Ganges. While these rivers bring life and sustenance to the region, their unpredictable nature can pose significant challenges. During periods of overflow, they have the power to devastate crops, disrupt livelihoods, and tragically claim lives. The people of Mithila have learned to navigate these ever-changing waters, adapting to the ebb and flow of their lifelines.

Within Mithila, several districts hold cultural and linguistic significance. Darbhanga and Madhubani emerge as important hubs, thriving with artistic and intellectual endeavours. These districts serve as beacons of Mithila's rich heritage, fostering a deep sense of pride among their residents. Across the border, in Nepal's Outer Terai region, lie districts that are home to the Maithili people and their language. Sarlahi, Mahottari, Dhanusa, Sunsari, Siraha, Morang, and Saptari create a cultural tapestry where Maithili thrives. The city of Janakpur, in particular, stands as a vibrant centre of the Maithili community, resonating with artistic expressions, cultural celebrations, and a strong sense of identity. As the rivers of Mithila continue to shape the landscapes and mold the lives of its inhabitants, the people of this region remain resilient. They find solace and inspiration in the ever-flowing waters, understanding the intricate bond between humans and the natural forces that surround them. Through the ebb and flow of these lifelines, Mithila's cultural heritage and linguistic traditions endure, carrying the stories of its people from generation to generation.

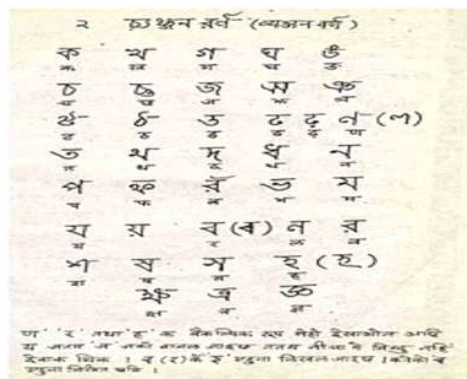
Rich cultural heritage and vibrant traditions of Mithila

The Maithili civilization originated in the Mithila region of India. The ancient kingdom of King Janaka is where the word “Maithili” originates from (Ramayana). Following their perilous journey over the deserts of Central Asia, the Aryans arrived in this fertile realm at the foothills of the Himalayas. Sita, the daughter of King Janaka, is Queen Maithili and the bride of King Rama. While Mithila’s commoners (Abahatta) spoke Maithili, the region’s scholars penned their works in Sanskrit. Mithila Madhubani is the name given to paintings from the Mithila region of India and Nepal. Historically, Mithila women have been successful. Its name comes from the city of Madhubani in the Indian state of Bihar. While this kind of wall painting was common throughout the region, the more contemporary style of painting on paper and canvas known as Madhubani art originated in the villages near Madhubani. The Paag is worn by Maithil people in Mithila, India, and Nepal. It holds a special place in Maithil culture. The Paag headdress, originally from Mithila, is a sign of respect and devotion for the Maithil people. Mithila dancers from India and Nepal perform Jhijhiya while balancing clay lanterns on their heads. Women of various Mithila communities often create murals using the Madhubani style of Mithila art. Many lesser-known languages are being lost as a result of globalisation, creating way for new ones. Most of us are blind to our own cultural wealth when it comes to things like food, travel, and entertainment, preferring instead the latest and greatest. Let’s explore the various cultures that make up our country. The leaves of plants were used to create the Paags of the past. It’s different now. The Paag is a uniformly worn item by Maithils. The hue of a paag is also a key factor. Red Paags are traditionally worn by grooms and by those who work with holy thread. Guests at a wedding wear yellow Paags, while the elders wear white. This Paag may be found in the widely used Macmillan Dictionary.

Language:

India is a country of tremendous cultural diversity, with 22 official languages and more than 1,650 dialects spoken throughout 29 states and 7 union territories as of 2019. Although the 2011 Indian Census recorded just 1,369 “mother tongues,” India has been home to numerous languages over the course of its long history. The culture

of Maithili is distinct and varied. People who speak Maithili often use other languages, such as Hindi, Nepali, English, and Bhojpuri, in their daily lives. Maithili's in Nepal speak Nepali. Parts of Bihar and Bengal are home to the Bengali language. This Indo-Aryan language is widely spoken in India and Nepal and is one of 22 officially recognised Indian languages. Nepal's second most common language is spoken in the Terai region to the east. To write in Maithili, one used Tirhuta. The word kaithi was also occasionally used. We now employ Devanagari. It is ranked number 40 worldwide and number 16 in India. The Ashokan Inscriptions date back to the third century B.C., and they use the Brahmi alphabet as the basis for the Maithilakshar or Tirhuta script. Devanagari is now in use because of how well-liked it is. Mithila, a lovely, verdant land without hills or mountains, is irrigated by rivers and rivulets. Because of its remote position, it has remained unconquerable for centuries. Thousands of years ago, Mathava Videgha and other enlightened seers visited the banks of the Sadanira. They crossed the river and settled in Mithila. Academic pursuits flourished in Vedic Mithila. The "Path of Rituals" (religion, or karma kanda) and the "Path of Knowledge" (philosophy, or jnana kanda) emerged from Vedic religious practises and Upanishad speculations even in early Vedic times



The author, Mithilesh Kumar Jha, disagrees with the widespread idea that Maithili is caste restricted. There is a lack of lived realism about this. Even though Bhojpuri is spoken by people of all castes and religions, only a small percentage of Mithila Muslims are fluent in

Maithili. Urdu-related dialects are spoken by the vast majority of Mithila's Muslim population. Formalities of Grammar and Style Historically, Maithili was written in scripts that resembled Bengali, such as Tirhuta and Mithilakshar. Maithili was also written in Kaithi. The current written form of Maithili is the Devanagari script. Maithili's survival and development in digital settings would be guaranteed by its Unicode encoding. Standard grammar is based on Maithili. The grammatical sutras of Panini, a Sanskrit scholar, form the foundation. The Vedas, Dharmashastra, Mimamsa, Niyaya, Vyakarana, and Jyotish (astronomy and astrology) were the pillars of a Mithila Sanskrit education. Non-Sanskrit based education was either not valued or strictly restricted. The Pandits were the most prominent and well-educated people in Indian society. The pandit's services were provided gratis. The Chaupadi (or Chatushpati, a four-Veda school) was a network of private residences where a number of pandits lectured. The majority of people supported the Pandits. On the other hand, certain Rajas and wealthy landowners would hire private pandits to perform religious ceremonies and teach their children. Vidyapati created the canon of Eastern literature, which includes Maithili, Sanskrit, and others. During the period of Vidyapati, early Eastern languages like Maithili and Bhojpuri developed from the Prakrit-derived late abahatta. Thus, Vidyapati is considered to have had on these languages what Dante and Chaucer had for Italian and English, respectively.

*When he robbed me off my clothes.
But his body became my new dress.
Like a bee hovering on a lotus leaf
He was there in my night, on me!*

In addition to their original language, Hindi, Bengali, and English are all spoken and understood by over half of Maithili speakers. In the Middle Ages, it served as the literary and court language of eastern India. Mithilakshar, the language used, is quite close to Bengali. The Proto-Bengali script, which developed from the Brahmi script about the year 1000 AD, is the common ancestor of Maithili, Bengali, and, to a lesser extent, Oriya and Assamese. The Maithili script is being preserved and enhanced through Unicode encoding for use in digital media. The Maithili language is written mostly in the Devanagari script, but the Kaithi script was previously in use.

People

The Maithili language is spoken by people of Indo-Aryan ancestry. It is believed that there are 45 million Maithils in India. There is a preponderance of Hindus. Castes in Mithila include Brahmins, Kayasthas, Bhumihars, Rajputs, Koeris, Baniyas, Kamatas, Ahirs, Kurmis, Dushads, Koeris, and many more. The Maithili language is the most warm and beautiful of all of them. Many individuals have remarked on how civil Maithili speakers' arguments come across. As a result of this, the "Hindi heartland" is home to a wide variety of languages and cultures. Speakers of Hindi's "dialects"—languages with various cultural/historical imaginaries—have often fought the language's supremacy in the region, which was achieved through a complex set of socio-political factors. To migrate is to relocate from one location to another. Long-distance, prospectively permanent relocation is implied. Thus, migration is the process of moving from one community to another. It's an exciting tale of people who want to find themselves in a different setting. Massive migration is a result of urbanisation and industrialization, which has far-reaching implications for both sending and receiving nations.

Maithili Literature

In the 19th century, linguists determined that Maithili was a Bihari dialect. According to Hoernlé, Bengali and Hindi share greater similarities. Grierson's grammar from 1881 solidified the language's status. There has been a wealth of Maithili writing since the 14th century. Animated as ever. Since this, it has continued to exist. The oldest Indo-Aryan prose work is Jyotirishwara's Maithili Varnaratnaakara. Poets and playwrights Vidyapati, Umapati, and Nandipati were popular in eastern India, as were the Malla kings of Nepal. The name "Maithili" comes from the ancient Mithila kingdom ruled by King Janaka. One of Sita's names was Maithili. Common people in Mithila spoke Maithili, while experts used Sanskrit for their writing. Between 700 and 1300 CE, Buddhist mystical poetry known as the "Charyapadas" established Maithili as a literary language. These padas are written in Sandhya bhasa by several Vajrayana Siddhas from Assam, Bengal, Bihar, and Odisha. It was the Mithila Siddhas, such as Kanhapa, Sarhapa, etc. Charyapada's language has been proven to be proto-Maithili by Rahul Sankrityayan, Subhadra Jha, and Jayakant Mishra.

Mithila was home to several folk musicians and the Charyapadas. In about 1327, the Karnata dynasty was founded by Harasimhadeva (1226-1324), and the Karnata backed the rise of the Maithili people and religion. Varna Ratnakara, a work of Maithili literature, was written by Jyotirishwar Thakur (1280-1340). The Varna Ratnakara, written by Jyotirishwar Thakur in Mithilakshar, is the earliest prose work in Maithili and the first in any modern Indian language. After Delhi's Emperor Ghyasuddin Tughluq defeated Harisimhadeva in 1324 and took control of Mithila, he granted the region to his family priest, Maithil Brahmin Kameshvar Jha of the Oiniwar dynasty. Maithili literature did not emerge until the reign of epoch-making poet Vidyapati Thakur (1360-1450) during the reigns of king Shiva Singh and queen Lakhima Devi. He wrote several Sanskrit treatises and over a thousand timeless Maithili songs about Radha and Krishna's love, Shiva and Parvati's domestic life, and the migrant labourers and families of the Morang. Saints, poets, and young people alike rapidly became enamoured with his love songs. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu recognised the transcendental affection at the heart of these tunes, and they soon became staples of Bengali Vaisnava worship. Curiosity led Rabindranath Tagore to imitate these songs as Bhanusimha. Asama, Bengali, and Utkala religious writing were all influenced by Vidyapati, and he also coined the language of Brajabuli. Amaduzzi, in his preface to Beligatti's *Alphabetum Brammhanicum* (1771), referred to Maithili, also known as Tirhutiya. Among the Indian languages, "Tourutiana" is included. Colebrooke classified Maithili as a language variety in 1801. Vaisnava saints Vidyapati and Govindadas composed devotional songs around the middle of the 17th century. Mapati Upadhyaya, a Maithili playwright, wrote Prijtahara. Kirtanias, professional bhajan singers from the Dalit caste, started performing this performance at festivals and royal palaces. Mithila's ragas, talas, and lyrics are described in Ragatarangni, a musical treatise written by Lochana (c.1575-c.1660). The Malla dynasty spread Maithili throughout Nepal in the 16th and 17th centuries. There are 70 different plays written in the Maithili language. Harishchandranityam, written by Siddhinarayanadeva (1620-57), features characters who speak Maithili, Bengali, Sanskrit, and Prakrit. When Maheshwar Singh, king of the Darbhanga Raj, passed away in 1860, the British administration took control as regent. Maharaj Lakshmishvar Singh took control of Darbhanga in 1898. Because of the Zamindari Raj, Maithili was ignored. MM the Maithili

language was revived by Parameshvar Mishra, Chanda Jha, Munshi Raghunandan Das, and others. The books *Maithil Hita Sadhana* (1905), *Mithila Moda* (1906), and *Mithila Mihir* (1908) had a significant impact on the literary scene. The Maithil Mahasabha was founded in 1910 with the goal of bettering Mithila. There was a strict policy against admitting non-Maithil Brahmins and Karna Kayasthas. The Maithil Mahasabha worked to get official status for Maithili as a spoken language of the region. Calcutta University was the first in 1917 to formally identify Maithili as a language. Bhola Lal Das produced a grammar book for the Maithili language. He edited both Maithili and *Gadyakusumanjali*. The Sahitya Academy, which promotes Indian literature, welcomed Maithili into its ranks in 1965. In 2002, the Indian government included Maithili to the list of 22 official languages known as Scheduled Languages. The Mithilakshar Maithili books were first published by Acharya Ramlochan Saran. Bhojpuri and Magahi, two close neighbours, have not always gotten along. Both of these groups have kept up with Maithili's literary and political successes. Only Maithili has steadfastly resisted Hindi's attempts to erase her unique culture and history. Both of the others appear to have given up and accepted their fate as Hindi varieties. Many contemporary poets and short story writers are working in Bhojpuri and Magahi, and their works are now being translated into other languages. Due to high levels of mutual intelligibility, Maithili translations are uncommon. Relations between Maithili and Hindi are tense. Although most Maithils now use Hindi in formal settings, many still speak Maithili at home and in literature. Like speakers of Hindi, Telugu, and Marathi, the younger generation is moving away from Maithili in favour of English. Since its addition to the 8th Schedule, Maithili has seen increased use in both everyday life and special events. Tagore's influence from mediaeval Maithili poetry, strong cultural ties, and a shared Sanskrit academic system have all contributed to the excellent reception that the Bengali language and its people have traditionally received outside of India. It was common practise for Maithili writers to read Bengali works in their original. The most common source languages for Maithili translation are Sanskrit and Bengali.

Conclusion:

In this paper, we made some attempts to shed light on Mithila-Maithili communication and the possible social dynamics amongst Mithilians.

Here is a chronology of Indian linguistic attitudes and usage, from antiquity to the present. The study examines the use of the Maithili language and literary traditions in daily life in this area. We have language so that we may express our feelings, thoughts, and even our anger to one another. Having the ability to communicate verbally is what sets us apart from other animals. Any human may pick up a new tongue in the correct setting. Language is distinct from the hard sciences, humanities, and social sciences. It is necessary to study and master the language. Communication and grammatical competence are both necessary for successful language learning. Culture and identity are reflected in one's language. But today more than ever, it is everyone's responsibility to learn their own language. But young people, in particular, need to feel a part of the world's cultural community. The author argues that scholars need to look at the "majoritarian turn in Indian politics" in order to understand the "formation of the Indian nation and nationalism and its various fault-lines based on language, religion, caste, peasants, tribe, gender, and regional or sub-national politics." Using Maithili language and history to articulate a modern Maithili identity.

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Between Faith and Freedom: The Representation of Muslim Women in Malabar's Literary and Cultural Landscape

Dr. Joseph Mathew* and Dr. Minna Ann Andrews**

Introduction

According to the Oxford Dictionary, “representation” refers to the process of explaining, describing, or conceptualizing a fact or idea within the mind or consciousness. In cultural studies, representation involves the exchange and creation of ideas, signs, and images by members of a culture (Stuart Hall, 1997).

In the realm of politics, the concept of “representation” takes on a different meaning, referring to acting or speaking on behalf of a constituency. Representation can take various forms, including verbal, visual, or narrative, and may embody ideas or concepts. Defining representation in a definitive sense proves difficult, as its interpretation is contingent upon an individual’s cultural, linguistic, and social background. Feminist literary criticism has significantly contributed to the exploration of the representation of women in literature. Within mainstream society, women are often marginalized or silenced, frequently facing adverse experiences stemming from gender-based discrimination. These male-dominated tendencies are also reflected in literary works.

In hierarchical societies, the representation of women is shaped by factors such as caste, religion, lineage, and social standing. Politics

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plays a crucial role in determining how women are depicted within society, culture, and literature. A key focus of analysis lies in how women represent themselves across diverse social strata and within literary texts. This has given rise to studies dedicated to understanding “female representation.”

Islamic Identity and Cultural Distinctiveness: The Unique Legacy of Malabar Muslims

Malabar is culturally distinct from other regions, shaped by systems such as landlordism, matriliney, and caste hierarchy. The introduction of Islam to the area can be traced back to the arrival of Arab traders, who came to Malabar for commercial and religious purposes. This early contact led to the development of a Muslim community in Malabar that differs significantly from other Muslim communities in the region. The fusion of Arab traditions with the indigenous customs of Malabar has resulted in a unique socio-cultural landscape. Islam made its initial presence in Kerala during its early stages, with its identity becoming more firmly established in Malabar. The caste structure and Hindu society in Malabar had distinctive characteristics compared to southern Kerala. For instance, Dr. M.R. Raghava Varier (2005) notes that the influence of the Namboothiri's (Brahmins) was relatively less pronounced in northern Kerala, which facilitated greater interaction between Muslims and other communities. This interaction allowed Malabar Muslims to assert their distinct cultural identity.

Due to historical and cultural factors, Malabar Muslims possess notable differences from other Muslim communities in Kerala. A deeper examination of the region's Muslim history, including its religious-political movements and the influence of reform, reveals these unique attributes. It is, therefore, illogical to consider Kerala's cultural and heritage context as a singular entity. For this reason, this study focuses on Malabar, emphasizing its distinctiveness. As Lakshmi R.S. (2013) highlights, Malabar Muslims were traditionally involved in trade. The term “Malabar” here refers to the cultural region following the British Malabar era.

The concept of “Muslim women” is frequently shaped by prevalent stereotypes. They are often depicted as individuals confined to a life behind the veil, uneducated, subservient to their husbands, and victims of unchecked male rights to polygamy and divorce. Cinema, literature, and social movements have played significant roles in perpetuating

such images (Shamshad Hussain, 2000,17). In contrast, this study presents a more nuanced perspective, exploring “Muslim women” within the unique regional and religious context of Malabar. It recognizes these women as individuals who actively shape their own agency and identity, challenging the reductionist stereotypes and highlighting their empowerment within their specific socio-cultural milieu.

Muslim Women’s Formation of Agency in History

Nilambur Ayesha stands out as a key figure in the history of modern Kerala. In a period when Kerala society was undergoing significant transformation, women began to assert their agency, challenging established caste, religious, and social structures. Ayesha’s emergence as a significant figure in this context marked a pivotal moment. Educated up to the fifth grade in the 1940s, she exhibited remarkable athleticism and competence as a child, often outpacing the boys in physical pursuits. History remembers her as a Muslim girl who embodied agency.

Born into a prosperous and culturally influential family, Ayesha’s life was dramatically altered when her father passed away, thrusting her into the role of head of her household. With the weight of responsibility now upon her, Ayesha’s education fostered a sense of determination to secure her own place in the world. In the cultural context of Kerala at that time, the role of a Muslim woman was largely confined to domestic religious practices, and the formation of agency for such women was often considered impossible. However, despite these societal constraints, Ayesha took on the responsibility of supporting her family independently. The influence of leftist ideologies and activism emboldened her, and when the opportunity arose, she found herself in a position of personal agency.

Her journey was fraught with challenges within Kerala’s social sphere. On one hand, the growth of individual agency through leftist ideologies provided a supportive environment, while on the other, rigid religious orthodoxy presented resistance. During this period of ideological clash, it became evident that the forces shaping agency were either ideological currents or entrenched thought processes. The development of agency in Ayesha’s life, shaped by both her personal experiences and the interventions of the broader social sphere, set her apart from other Muslim women and earned her recognition in

society. When Ayesha's role as a stage actress and public speaker was accepted, her agency was celebrated, though there were attempts to curtail her activities. Undeterred by these oppositions, she continued to assert her presence within the ideological sphere, growing stronger over time. Eventually, Kerala acknowledged Ayesha's agency as legitimate, which, in turn, empowered other Muslim women to assert their own agency.

At a time when the education of Muslim women was discouraged, a general awakening emerged among Muslim women in Kerala, inspired by reformist movements led by figures like Makhthitha (1847) and Chalikath (1855). These reformers advocated for women's education and organized women's conferences, such as those held in 1910-1913. T.V. Abdul Rahman discussed this shift in his work *Muslim Education from Alif to I.S.* (Abdul Rahman, 2013), noting that Ayesha's education might have been influenced by such reformist activities. Additionally, Ayesha's father's progressive mindset further contributed to shaping her sense of agency.

In 1938, at a women's conference in Thiruvalla, Halima Beevi remarked: "Many of us, who were once considered illiterate and criminal for seeking education, have today become scholars. The misconception that women would go astray if educated has largely been dispelled, which is comforting. Education has enabled us to expand, explain, and assert our opinions, and to make declarations. It is through the tremendous power of education that we, who were once held back by fear and shame, are now gathered here in this assembly." (Shamshad Hussain, 2005)

Another historical figure who made a significant impact was Halima Beevi. During the 1930s, she played an active role in the reform movements and became a prominent advocate for women's rights through various organizations and initiatives. Dr. Shamshad Hussain highlights Halima as one of the women who gained mainstream recognition through her involvement in these movements (Shamshad Hussain, 2013).

Other notable Muslim women from this period include Hindi Rashtrabhasha Visharadh Passu, P.G. Khadeeja, Maithin, Beevi among others, who were dedicated to the upliftment of Muslim girls (Shamshad Hussain, 2013). These women were instrumental in advancing the cause of education and social reform for women in their communities.

Prominent organizations such as the Akhila Thiruvithamkoor Muslim Women's Association and the Muslim Mahila Samajam in Thalassery were significant platforms where women actively participated, organizing conferences and other activities aimed at social reform. Dr. Shamshad Hussain records these efforts in his article *Kerala Renaissance and Muslim Women* (Shamshad Hussain, 2013).

In this environment, women were forming their agency both educationally and politically, contributing to the wider societal changes. It was during this period of empowerment that the play *Ithu Bhoomiyanu* (This is the Land) emerged, reflecting the evolving role of women and their growing presence in cultural and social spheres.

Muslim Women's Agency Formation in Literature

K.T., born in 1929, emerged at a time when ideas of societal reform and renaissance were gaining traction. During this period, significant reform efforts were visible in communities, particularly in Malabar, where leaders like V.T. and others in the Namboothiri community played a key role. K.T. sought to initiate reform within his own community, culminating in the play *Ithu Bhoomiyanu* (1953).

The play is not an attack on religion, but rather an attempt to raise awareness among Muslims about the dangers of blind faith and misinterpretations of their religious practices. It critically examines the obstacles to the formation of agency for Muslim women and their position within society. Central to the play is the challenge to the notion that reform within religion should only be led by men, with a strong emphasis on the need to dismantle patriarchal structures within religious frameworks.

During the 1940s, the Mujahid movement gained influence in Malabar. Known as Wahhabis, these reformists sought to purify Islam and emphasized the role of women in Islamic teachings, advocating for their education. The protagonist of the play, Khalid, is a revolutionary influenced by these reformist ideals. His father, a Wahhabi, faces social exclusion and ridicule for his beliefs. Despite this, Khalid and his father remain steadfast in their positions (K.E.N, 2009).

At the start of the play, the landlord engages in a conversation with his daughter Kadeeja about the importance of women covering their heads, asserting that Muslim women must adhere to religious guidelines. Later, Hassan mocks Kadeeja in a derisive manner,

questioning her adherence to religious practices. One of his lines, “Does the sky and the earth not lose their significance” (Page 144), not only targets Kadeeja but also Muslims in general. The play critiques the Islamic notion that women, by following religious guidelines, are promised paradise in the afterlife, suggesting that this belief diminishes women’s agency by confining them to prescribed roles.

In the play, the landlord symbolizes religious orthodoxy. His harsh views are evident when he states, “The cobbler, the butcher, the carpenter, all are in hell, and the fire of hell is the one we see here” (Page 129). He continues with another rigid statement: “The kafirs are like the skin of the cow in hell, burning with fire, that’s what we see here...” (Page 129). In response to this, Kadeeja poses an innocent question, “If you remove all the strings of this thread, won’t the bridge made of hair collapse” (Page 130). This question marks a moment of awakening, prompting a reflection from her father: “There are some things that we are not allowed to question. Everything belongs to Allah’s will. I went to Basra. Should a girl ask unnecessary questions You should sing your song” (Page 130).

The father, as the patriarch, dismisses Kadeeja’s curiosity with a harsh, unyielding response. There is no explanation or justification for religious practices in this moment, only suppression of her questioning. This marks a significant moment in the play, highlighting the absence of agency for women under such an authoritative structure. Kadeeja’s innocent inquiry represents the struggle for women’s agency in a rigidly controlled religious context, where the roles women are expected to follow are enforced through fear and intimidation.

Through the character of Kadeeja, K.T. portrays the absence of agency for women within a patriarchal society and calls for an awakening to the necessity of forming agency. The play ultimately highlights the importance of questioning established norms and the formation of agency in the absence of an authoritative structure that silences dissent.

Inspiration and the Formation of Muslim Women’s Agency in *Ithu Bhoomiyanu*

K.T. found inspiration for his groundbreaking play *Ithu Bhoomiyanu* (1953) during a visit to Dr. Usman’s nursing home in Nilambur. There, he encountered the life of a poor Muslim girl who worked at the home, and the juxtaposition of her lived experiences against the weight

of religious dogma sparked K.T.'s creative process. The encounter led to the creation of the play, which is regarded as the first Malayalam play that not only incorporates Muslim language but also critiques the blind adherence to religion, particularly as it pertains to the treatment of women. Through this work, K.T. sought to challenge superstitions disguised as religious mandates, reflecting real-life experiences that revealed the oppressive nature of patriarchal religious norms (K.E.N., 2009).

In the play, the discussion of Kadeeja's marriage proposal becomes a moment of reflection on women's agency. When Khalid learns of the proposal, he questions the importance of seeking a woman's consent:

Khalid: "Why are you asking for permission now?"

Amina: "Permission doesn't matter, right Without the woman's consent, nothing can happen, right"

Khalid: "After the people gather, the food is served, everything is done, then why ask for permission" (Page 126)

This conversation critiques the patriarchal mindset that dominates the formation of a woman's agency, with Khalid's mocking tone underscoring the relegation of women's autonomy. Amina, the character in question, represents religious conservatism, having no established identity or personal agency. Her passivity reflects the broader social pattern in which women's thoughts and actions are shaped by external forces, rather than their own desires and decisions.

This concept of suppressed agency is also explored in Uroob's *Sundarikalum Sundaranmarum*, where a girl wrestles with the concept of sacrificing her agency for societal approval. As in K.T.'s portrayal of Kadeeja, the female characters in Uroob's work are confined by religious education and expectations, rendering them unable to act independently, even in their most personal matters, such as marriage.

The narrative is further explored in *Ithu Bhoomiyanu*, where Kadeeja, alongside Pathe, begins to question her role in society and the world around her:

Kadeeja: "Pathe, Grandpa, didn't they tell us that the Earth is round"

Pathe: "That girl. Yes, it is round. Her mind is like a sweet orange, it's round. But how did it turn and show us"

Kadeeja: “I thought a lot about it. Then what’s the reason we don’t fall off”

In this moment, Kadeeja begins to embrace scientific thinking, something previously outside the bounds of religious education. This shift represents her questioning of religious constraints and an awakening to the broader possibilities for women beyond domestic confines. Kadeeja’s curiosity and skepticism mirror the larger theme of women’s struggle for agency in a world that seeks to confine them to predetermined roles.

Pathe: “Aren’t we women, just like men Shouldn’t we have the same freedom for everything” (Page 144)

Here, the play directly questions the rigid boundaries imposed on women and encourages a rethinking of gender roles. The dialogue between Kadeeja and Pathe illustrates the early stirrings of women asserting their rights and demanding equality in every aspect of life. The question arises: *Who created these boundaries*

The issue of religious constraints on women is further emphasized through the portrayal of Malappuram women, who, despite their revered status in religious contexts, are still confined by societal expectations. The presence of shrines such as those in Ponnani, including the significant legends surrounding figures like Ibrahimabeevi and Munabbathabeevi, provides a complex narrative. While these shrines elevate women to positions of reverence, the parallel reality is that women’s autonomy is limited by religious and social boundaries. The contradiction lies in how the very religion that venerates women also diminishes their agency by imposing restrictions.

The play *Ithu Bhoomiyanu* effectively critiques this duality, questioning whether a religion that venerates women can simultaneously disregard their autonomy. It exposes the forces at play that twist religious interpretations to control and suppress women, thereby stifling their personal agency and growth. Through Kadeeja’s awakening, K.T. calls for a reimagining of religious and social norms, where women are no longer confined by invisible boundaries.

In *Ithu Bhoomiyanu* (This is the Land), K.T. critiques the forces manipulating the religious and social roles of women, challenging long-held beliefs about submission and the subjugation of Muslim women. Through his characters, especially Hassan, Pathe, and Khalid, K.T. explores the contradictions embedded in religious orthodoxy,

particularly how it has been manipulated to maintain male-dominated power structures.

Hassan's mocking lines reveal a cynicism toward the supposed origin of women's subjugation in religious mythology, particularly in reference to the fall of Adam and Eve:

Hassan: "Heaven's mother made a mistake, Adam ate the fruit, That's the reason, It's Iblis (Satan), isn't it!"

This song encapsulates how the narrative of submission in Islam has been twisted, with Hassan questioning the very foundation of the role assigned to women in religion. The play critiques the idea that a woman's role is one of inherent submission and that this submission is the cause of her defined existence in a patriarchal framework.

The conversation between Khalid and the others reveals the tragic reality for women like Kadeeja, whose fate seems preordained: marriage, motherhood, religious duties, and an eventual, unquestioned passage into the afterlife. This deterministic worldview reduces women to mere instruments of reproduction, their lives and desires subjugated to societal and religious expectations:

Hassan: "If she's a good girl, they'll bring a match for her without any issue. If not, a man will bring her a husband, and after that, she will have children, fast, pray, grow old, and die, then go to heaven..." (Page 146)

K.T. uses Hassan's character to highlight the systemic forces that confine women to a narrow existence, while Pathe's evolution throughout the play embodies a challenge to these constraints. Initially, women like Pathe are presented within conventional frameworks—submissive and constrained—but through self-awareness and a shift in perspective, they begin to assert their own agency.

Pathe's realization about her role in Islam challenges the rigid patriarchy that defines her. She asserts that Islam does not endorse the subjugation of women and that women have the right to education, personal development, and even the ability to advise men. This moment of clarity marks her transformation into a revolutionary figure who refuses to be confined by societal norms:

Pathe: "In Islam, women are not slaves to men. The religion has not said that women should not have an education. I studied. For the improvement of my life and the lives of those connected to me, I made this effort, and when you married me, I tried to be a good wife. I fast, I pray, and I

haven't found anything in Islam that says this is wrong." (Page 156)

Pathe's words signify a challenge to the patriarchal perspective of Islam, as she advocates for the recognition of women as free and equal beings, capable of contributing to society in all spheres. Her acknowledgment of her right to question male authority and her belief in equal freedom for men and women underscores K.T.'s call for reform within both the religious and social structures.

K.T. uses Khalid to personify the driving force of this change. Despite resistance, Khalid encourages Pathe to break boundaries and engage in public life, pushing the concept of a "Muslim woman" into new territories. Through him, K.T. demonstrates that the transformation of women's roles in society is not just about their own awakening, but also about the men who challenge the status quo:

Hassan: "To be honest, this is what should happen. Women should not be trapped in homes, fighting and dying. Let them see the light. Everything in this world is for the betterment of human beings; Allah has created it for us. Why should we avoid experiencing it" (Page 152)?

At the climax of the play, Pathe confronts the patriarchal authority, rejecting the notion of women's subjugation and embracing her newfound autonomy. When she declares, "I did not come here out of fear of you. There is no need for me to fear you," she solidifies her transformation. Pathe is no longer a passive figure; she has become an active agent in her own life, capable of making decisions based on her personal values and beliefs:

Pathe: "It was for Khalid that I came here. If he tells me, I will go. If you tell me, I will perish. If he tells me, I will live." (Page 163)

K.T. also places the responsibility for the plight of women on the men of the community. In the final moments of the play, Khalid's words underscore this message, as he reminds the elders of their role in perpetuating ignorance and oppression:

Khalid: "This is the earth. You should know this, elders. You all seem to forget. You speak by looking up at the sky."

Through this declaration, Khalid not only reminds the men of their responsibility to uplift women but also highlights the earth—symbolizing reality and the present—as the space in which change must occur. By pushing back against religious orthodoxy, K.T.

establishes that women's agency is a key factor in societal progress, and that their rightful place is in the public sphere, where they can engage fully in the betterment of both themselves and their community.

Conclusion

The play *This is the Earth* by K.T. and the biography of Nilampur Ayisha both serve as powerful narratives that critique the patriarchal structure and the religious conservatism of their time. Through their introspective and imaginative portrayals, both works highlight the process of transformation that Muslim women undergo, moving from a position of subjugation to one of self-awareness, authority, and leadership.

K.T.'s play, alongside Nilampur Ayisha's biography, underscores the shift in male-centered perspectives, which was pivotal in empowering women. Both Ayisha and the characters in the play, such as Pathe, reflect the revolutionary thoughts that ultimately enable women to break free from the traditional roles imposed by religious and cultural constraints. This change is not only social but deeply personal, as the characters gain self-awareness and begin to challenge the authority that restricts them.

The setting of these works—Kerala during a time of religious conservatism—further emphasizes the courage required to challenge the prevailing structures. In this context, the advocacy for religious reform and women's empowerment emerges as central to both K.T.'s writing and Ayisha's life. The play and the biography, despite differing in genre, collectively point to a reimagining of the role of women in Muslim society. This reimagining is grounded in the transformation of authority—when women gain self-awareness, break free from patriarchal systems, and are recognized for their intellectual and administrative capabilities.

Through these works, the traditional concept of the "Muslim woman" is challenged. The recognition of women as independent, authoritative figures is a significant step in reshaping societal norms. Both K.T.'s fictional exploration in the play and Ayisha's real-life journey reflect the transformative power of self-awareness, education, and the courage to question established structures.

Ultimately, both works illustrate the importance of subjective experiences in democratizing a patriarchal society. They show how Muslim women in Malabar, through education and activism,

transitioned from being subjugated figures to becoming self-aware leaders with the authority to influence change. The narrative arc that begins in *This is the Earth* is realized in the biography of Nilampur Ayisha, who embodies the ideals of transformation, leadership, and empowerment. Together, they mark a significant moment in the history of Muslim women's social and intellectual emancipation in Kerala.

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