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**The Intricacies of Gender Norms and Micro Enterprise Units:
Interpreting the Narratives of Women Entrepreneurs of
Kudumbashree**

Krishna S.*

Abstract

Equal access to and control over economic and financial resources by women are a crucial factor in attaining gender equality and women empowerment. However globally entrepreneurship is often considered a gendered arena as majority business ventures are male led and so is the case of Micro Enterprise. In Kerala context, Kudumbashree has served as an entry point in encouraging women to enter the arena of Micro Enterprise. Still, the entry into and sustaining in the field was not an easy task for many of the first-generation entrepreneurs. This qualitative study examines the lived experience of these women from a gendered lens and critically analyse how the gender norms and stereotypes have influenced their experience of entrepreneurship. Ahl and Marlow's (2012) argument for a post-structural gendered analysis of entreprenuring as an alternative perspective to challenge the axiomatic normative assumptions embedded within the entrepreneurial field has been employed as a method as well

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as theory in this study. The results indicate specific ways in which gender norms have shaped their experience especially with regard to their choice of type of unit, location of unit, decision making, the financial dependence, decisive role of their partner, the vicious cycle of gender division of labour and the multiple burdens they experience only because of being a woman. It is argued that gender norms have a critical role on the entrepreneurial experience of women and so any attempt towards empowerment has to address the basic structural relations at the outset.

Keywords: Kudumbashree, women entrepreneur, micro enterprise, gender norms, gender roles

Entrepreneurship adds much towards the economic development of any country and so Micro, Small, and Medium-sized Enterprises (MSMEs) are key components of any economy. Their role includes not only job creation and stimulating innovation but also employment growth and poverty alleviation. Any economic activity has to be open and accessible to any gender. Equal access to and control over economic and financial resources by women are a crucial factor in attaining gender equality and women empowerment. However, most business activities globally are led by male entrepreneurs, which leads to a gendered definition of entrepreneurship (Lee and Marvel, 2013; de Pillis and Meilich 2006; Gupta, 2009; Laguía, 2018). Gender roles and prejudices are a big reason why women and men are different when it comes to starting their own businesses. Gender norms, society and culture discriminate against women and make it even more difficult for them to start a venture. (Marlow and Swail, 2014). It is in this background of gendered norms and stereotypes that this study is placed in the State of Kerala, exploring the lived experience of women entrepreneurs of Kudumbashree.

As in case of many other vital human development indexes, Kerala tops in the involvement of women in the field of entrepreneurship. As per the statistics published by the Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, (Kerala State Planning Board, 2022) total number of women enterprises in Kerala are 139225 and the estimated number of enterprises led and managed by women was 137561 which is much above the national average (<https://www.dcmsme.gov.in/ssiindia/census/ch11.html>). The addition of 35,000 women -led enterprises in the State during 2023 highlight that, the business eco-system in Kerala is gradually witnessing active involvement of women. (OD Desk, 2023).

Though this is the state of affairs at present, the entry and presence of women in the field of enterprise wasn't much welcoming in the past. D'Cruz (2003) in her study stating the statistics of Industries Department show that as of 1997 December only 549 women units were functioning successfully out of 6861 women units and that targets of Women Industries programme (WIP) and Integrated Rural Development programme (IRDP) have remained unachieved and thereby established that only a little less than four percent of the female population has taken up entrepreneurship as a career during the end of nineties in Kerala despite favourable government policies, loan facilities, incentives, and training programmes for women. Kudumbashree along with other Government departments such as industries are conducting training programmes to address the needs of potential women entrepreneurs of the State.

Micro Enterprise Units of Kudumbashree

Promotion and development of micro enterprises is one of the key strategies of Kudumbashree Mission to facilitate economic empowerment of the poor. (About Microenterprises, 2025). 3.23 lakh women in the State's microenterprise sector are said to have been given the opportunity to work for themselves as a result of Kudumbashree's numerous initiatives. A total of 1,63,458 businesses has been established, including over 50,000

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group businesses and over a lakh individual business. Both the production and service sectors are covered by businesses. The most popular areas cover food production, value-added product manufacturing and food processing such as Amrutham Nutrimix and Haritha Karma Sena units engaged in collection of household waste. Microenterprise units by vulnerable group namely Prathyasha comprise of individuals from marginalised sections such as Elderly, PWD, and Transgender, mothers of intellectually disabled children and widows. In the post flood scenario of Kerala Kudumbashree launched a skill campaign namely ARISE to impart skill training to fifty thousand individuals in different sectors such as masonry, electric work, plumbing etc. Pravasi Bhadratha – PEARL renders handholding support to the low profile NRK returnees affected by Covid pandemic. As part of these thirty crore rupees have been set apart by the Government. The support offered to entrepreneurs comprises Training sessions, financial support and Marketing assistance (“Kudumbashree provides employment”, 2025).

Women and Kudumbashree Micro Enterprise

The way Micro Enterprise units of Kudumbashree have influenced and impacted the beneficiaries is a much-researched topic. The constraints faced and varied kinds and levels of empowerment attained as outcome has been researched widely. This section attempts to brief the major studies in this regard. Beevi & Devi (2011) in their quantitative experimental study of twenty-four Government and twenty-four Non-Government SHGs with and without Micro enterprises of Kollam District of Kerala aimed to assess the role of SHGs in empowering rural women and the constraints faced by its members. Majority of the respondents of SHGs with micro-enterprises are reported to have high perception on social role when compared to SHGs without enterprises. However Self-Help Groups without enterprises were found to be less empowered, socially and economically than those

with enterprises. The major constraints faced by SHGs with ME are that of difficulty in playing dual roles of housewife and entrepreneur. Dropout of members due to marriage and employment, lack of managerial skill, delay in getting funds on time, lack of working capital and vehicle for transport at the unit, lack of training programme, lack of co-ordination, lack of pertinent knowledge and new innovation, lack of effective leadership and improper repayment of loans reported by the members of Government and Non- Government SHGs without enterprises.

Minimol And Makesh's (2012) study on SHGs held at three villages of Alappuzha District analysed the level of personal, social, economic and financial empowerment attained by its members and also critically evaluated the general nature and impact of participation in SHGs on rural women. The study covered three categories of SHGs as Kudumbashree, NGO and other caste and religious ones. However economic empowerment was recorded low owing to low employment and skill generation and so was social empowerment in terms of low awareness of social problems and participation in social programmes. The social skills acquired are Organisational skills, interactive skills, public speaking, social acceptance, membership in other organisations and awareness of social rights. Family and job responsibilities and absence of family support were reported as posing difficulties for active participation in group activities.

Venugopal (2014) evaluated the extent to which Kudumbashree programmes have led to rural women's empowerment. Study draws on the data collected from members of 5 micro enterprise units of Kozhikode district. Under women empowerment varied components with indicators were chosen. The findings report an increase in the acquisition of personal skills, decision making power, Ability to participate in gramasabhas. However, not much increase in knowledge acquisition in such areas as knowledge about government projects

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and rights of women is found among the members. On the basis of insights gained the author suggests recommendations such as: proper information to be given to Kudumbashree members to know about the aim and objectives of Kudumbashree, imparting proper entrepreneur development programmes and to encourage involvement in politics.

Kumar's (2011) descriptive and analytical study on 45 micro enterprise of Kudumbashree in three panchayats of the Ernakulam district of Kerala reveals the general and economic prospects of the enterprises along with different problems confronted by micro-entrepreneurs along with strategies to be adopted by the enterprises to survive in the competitive environment .The enterprise analysed belong to different categories as Manufacturing, Processing, Trading, Service, Agriculture and Dairy Farm. The major advantages reported were full-time and part-time employment generation.

Narayanan and Kumar (2023) did an evaluative study on the operations of Kudumbashree micro enterprises and its impact on the economic change and social upliftment of women with special reference to the Palakkad district. The findings suggest that micro enterprises have led to improvement in livelihood and social status of deprived class members.

Shehnaz and Kumar (2017) focussed on the issues related to the production, marketing, asset management, profitability, government support and women empowerment issues faced by the microenterprise units under Kudumbashree. The study identified seven key elements that explained the differences in the Kudumbashree mission-related microenterprise units' performance. The main problems found there were categorized as external environmental problems, which included excessive borrowing interest rates and power outages. According to reports, the benefits include increased social engagement and acceptability, higher economic independence and financial

literacy, increased ability to handle challenging situations, and confidence in personal, family, and social interactions brought about by earning money through employment. Therefore, the micro-business units' increased social acceptance and engagement were responsible for their economic independence. The empowerment of women is emphasized by the necessity of advanced management training, appropriate planning, and prompt intervention by nodal agencies in charge, and training programs that improve leadership abilities and asset management decision-making.

The above background study and review of literature points to the fact that most of the studies on Kudumbashree and Micro Enterprise have addressed three major areas- the nature and extent of empowerment made possible by entrepreneurship, the constraints and problems faced by the members and their units and resultant suggestions. The gap thus identified is that majority studies have focussed on the outcome or impact and issues while none have addressed the initial experience of the women entrepreneurs who ventured into the arena of small-scale business and also the contextual factors of gendered norms and stereotypes. This study contributes to this area by focussing on the lived experience of the women who entered the field of micro enterprise during the incipient phase of its introduction with special reference to the way societal gender norms and mores shaped their entry, existence and continuation in the field.

Context, Question and Method

The researcher chose a single village of Kerala as the site of study- Edakkatuvayal village of Ernakulam District. Ernakulam District tops the list of districts with the highest number of ME-2682 units out of the Statewide 14142 units. (Likhita, 2018). The particular village has bagged Best CDS Award constituted by State Mission thrice- twice at District level and once at State Level. Considering the participatory nature of the programme it was possible to arrive at the assumptions that only through active

involvement of the women will they be able to bag the top position and for this to happen the women would have come forward and actively participated in different arenas including Micro Enterprise sector.

This study is aimed at acquiring an emic view of the experiences of the first-generation women entrepreneurs of Kudumbashree. The study falls under the Retrospective design propounded by Flick (2009) in which data is gathered retrospectively and certain events and processes are analysed in respect of their meaning for individuals. The overall approach of this study is chosen to be that of Narrative Approach. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe narrative inquiry as a way of understanding experience. The focus of narratives drawn and analysed in this study will be on the content rather than the form. In depth unstructured interviews, focus group discussions and informal chats formed the basic tool of data collection. The study participants composed of seven women, representing different units; selected through purposive sampling techniques, the first-generation entrepreneurs of the village who were willing to share their experience. The study aims to explore the gendered context in which the ME units were begun and the impact and influence of these norms on its functioning and activities. This covers the role played by gender norms in the very selection of the type of unit to its running, including the location, gendered division of labour from partner, etc. This descriptive scene setting forms a major component of Ahl's and Marlow's (2012) methodology of post structural feminist critique.

Data Presentation and Discussion

The Initial Phase

Kudumbashree's initial way of encouraging women to take up income generating activity was encouraging them to pool in whatever little amount they had and use it to begin some small business such as snack making, sales of readymade dress etc.

Before the formal introduction of ME projects, the members pooled in their available resources, made use of their expertise and group strength to engage in small businesses. Prasanna, aged 43 one of the initial entrepreneurs recalled:

My first earnings were from the snack making unit we began in 2001. We four NHG Members began the unit, inspired by a Ks class we participated in. It was then that we realised the value of the time we have wasted so far, the need for earning something by ourselves and gradually to earn more and not to depend on husband for our little needs like purchasing a dress or a sandal.

Four of us, belonging to the same NHG pooled in Rs 300/- each. Many got the amount from their husbands. I also got it from my husband, but I repaid it soon out of my share from the profit. We began making some traditional snacks. Snack making was our choice, because that was what we knew well and did not need much training. Also that was the most acceptable one amongst our family members. Economically, she was well off compared to us and so had comparatively better space and utensils at her home, where we used to gather. Besides this convenience logic, the main reason we worked from there was that there were no other men in the house, as her husband was working at Tamil Nadu and returned once in a week only. Our husbands also agreed because there were no other men in that house. We took utmost care in preparing the same and used the best quality raw materials for the same. It was sold in the nearby houses, which was known to us. We had a working arrangement among us, two of us go for sales while two others cook and pack it. This is done on a rotation basis.

Though it was profitable initially, later on profits began to fall as many other Ks members also began making snacks. And our products were comparatively costlier as we used

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good quality raw materials. Also, many bought our produce on debit and we couldn't move ahead, as we didn't have separate capital to rely on. It was from the sales of produce only that we could purchase more raw materials.

That was a good initiative, as we were spending our time creatively, earning something by ourselves, could spend time together and also, we could move around the neighbourhood in groups. It was the weekly meetings and this snack making unit which gave us a platform to move out from home, mingle with others and engage in creative works.

Preparation and sales of Hair oil was an income generating attempt by another group. The informal economic activity group by the NHG members was started in 2002 and ran till 2007. Initially it had ten members which in due course fell to seven. Vijitha described:

Our ward member used to ask us, "Why don't you try out some small business? Anyway, you all are remaining within your homes. " After several rounds of the same question, ten of us decided to try out something. Naturally making snacks was our first option, but our CDS member asked us to think of something useful and different. While we were searching for an idea, it struck us that our ward member's husband, who was a school master, also had some knowledge of Ayurveda. We approached him through our ward member and learnt to prepare Ayurveda hair oil. Initial investment was Rs 50 by each member, contributed by our husbands. Under his guidance we prepared one kilogram of oil and found it to be a success. Slowly we scaled up to 40 kg. A bottle was priced at Rs 25/-. We sold it through door-to-door sales.... for each bottle sold the member got five rupees as commission. We

had enough customers in the locality and also, we used to sell it to our relatives and neighbours of our own home village. That was our first investment and first return. We were so happy. I used to buy vegetables, fruits, fish or grocery using the profit. It was a different experience. Earlier when my children asked for something, I had to ask and press my husband for some cash to fulfill it. With this I could buy them their favourite food items. And also pay my weekly thrift out of this. We went ahead with it for around three years from 2002- 2005.” In addition, we moved out of home and gained an idea of our own locality to which we have belonged for years, but without any contacts.

Another group venture started by an NHG of the third ward was that of Dry Fish business. It was shut down after a short period owing to financial fraud by one of its members. Santha recalls

One of our members Neena’s house was at Kochi and so she put forth the idea that we could start a small business on it and we all agreed and so took a loan of five thousand rupees from revolving fund and invested three thousand. It was in 2006. Neena used to bring the dry fish from her place and we trusted her and so believed the price she told. The venture was going well and later on we became suspicious of her financial dealings; but before we could catch her red handed, she left for another place along with her husband. We did not intimate or discuss this with our husbands, as that will cause even more issues as they were all already disinterested in such ventures. Financial loss is an added burden for women as all know we don’t make money and so we have to spend it carefully.... That was a lesson for us- not to believe others. With that we stopped all ventures.

Branching out to Micro Enterprise

Slowly but steadily, women realised the potential of small business ventures and began to take lead in small scale production. This was when Micro enterprise was officially launched by Kudumbasree. The experiences of these units are worth analysing from the participant's perspective.

Hen Rearing Unit

One of the most accepted micro enterprises of Ks women is that of hen rearing. Anamma who belong to the Jyothi ME, begun in 2014 by five members pointed out:

Our husbands didn't oppose this activity because, hen rearing is very popular in this agrarian village and almost all families belonging to the lower class are engaging in it. Almost all of us engaged in this group venture already have hen at our own home though on a small scale. The men found it attractive because it provides the family with some income and above all we will be available at home because the hen farm is set up in an open space adjacent to the member's house. We are double happy because it gives us an earning, we all can spend time together and also have husband's support and help in cleaning it up and all...

The farm located a few yards away from the houses was said to have been set up amidst a rubber plantation, after clearing a significant portion of it which belongs to one member of the group. This farm rears black hen, which is comparatively costlier than ordinary hen and it was around Rs 25/- per egg, unlike the common egg which fetches only around Rs 4 or 5. The men working in the farm were husbands of three of the ME members. All of them are basically daily wage labourers- driver, painter and coolie worker. The men shared the farm details:

Five of us work here in the farm on turn basis, every morning before we leave for work and in the evening after returning back from home. In between during day time the

women attend to the hen. These black hens need more care and attention unlike the usual hen. Here every morning, we clean up the farm and remove wastes and excreta.... check the water supply system installed and also provide hen feed. By evening two other men among us also do the needful. However, this is a profitable one.

They also pointed to the support from their husbands

As she said, our men help in the daily care of the hen, sell off the eggs and also once in a while, they together do the repairing and maintenance of the shed. If we were to hire paid labourers for this, then our profit would have fallen. Hence their free labour helps add to our profit.

In fact, it was very evident that this ME unit, which is one of the most successful ones in the village, was managed well because of the cooperation and support among not only the five ME member women but also their husbands.

The researcher also visited another ME under the same project- of Black Hen- situated in another ward. Unlike the pleasant and profitable tale and atmosphere of the Jyothi ME, herein the beneficiary members had stories of loss and struggles.

It was a project directly implemented by the District Mission and the ME consultant agreed to purchase our eggs at Rs 30/- and pay us. But did nothing and we have to sell it off by ourselves. How can we sell an egg at Rs 30/- in an agriculture village like this, where the majority are economically poor? Will anyone purchase an egg at that cost, no matter whatever medicinal value it has? We were forced to sell it off at Rs 8 and 10/-. We don't have any support system from home and are unable to find a market to sell it...It was on our guarantee to make profit that our partners allowed us to join the venture. In addition to the economic loss, we are also facing condemnation from our husbands for having ventured into it and wasted time. said Rani a member.

Ksheerasagaram Unit

Ksheerasagaram, a state wide project launched by Ks had its beneficiaries in this village as well. Aswathy got married in 1993 and her husband is running a small workshop along with family cultivation. She described her husband as very much supportive and so is her mother-in-law. In addition, she feels that the participation of all three sisters-in-law in the same NHG added to the acceptance of their family.

She was all praise for Ks and the blessings it has brought to her.

My first independent earning ever in my life was made possible by Ks. It was in 2007 that I joined the Ksheerasagaram project. My husband gave permission to join the project as he knew we will get a loan and such financial benefits and also ours is an agricultural family and naturally they are interested in rearing cows. That was a group project and we underwent the three-day residential training at Kakkanad. As initial assistance we received two and a half lakh rupees as loan to construct a cow shed; of that thirty-seven thousand five hundred was subsidy. Four of us constructed the shed at our own homes. As a second instalment we received fifty thousand rupees each to buy the first cow and six months later assistance to buy the second cow. I had to begin the repayment the very next month of receiving the loan. The first six months were profitable as we got enough milk and later on the milk availability started falling.

Still, I am so happy about my involvement in it. Whatever returns from selling milk was mine and husband didn't ask for it though he used to help me a lot by bathing the cow, milking it and often giving it off to the nearby cooperative society for sales. My material achievement was that I have bought around five sovereigns of gold.

She added that a portion of income was also used to invest in their group-based vegetable cultivation so that they need not depend on their husband for investment in agriculture.

The benefits of the activity in her own words run as:

Beyond the material benefits I earned, what is closer to my heart is the mental relief it bestowed on me. My one and only son who is 19 years now is affected by cerebral palsy. Once my husband left for the workshop and son to special school, I was all alone at home. I used to ponder over my fate and weep. As I bought the cows and began engaging in vegetable cultivation, I became busy and had no time to sit and think. Once they left I began going to the field with the cow and spending time with my NHG friends. That is a great relief for me.

Soap making Unit

Another unit was that of a Soap making unit. The unit was working from a rented room, a small room with not much furniture and all. Just a chair and table on which were kept a few registers which they offered to have a look at. It composed the units' minutes register which was maintained neatly and also the sales register in which was recorded the quantity of produce, sales, returns, per head sales, sharing of profit and such other details.

The Unit Secretary Sandhya was the first to speak:

It was our Ward member who asked our NHG members to attend a soap powder making training held in the nearby panchayat by Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad. Two of our members learnt it. We had to pay rupees one hundred and fifty per person. sixteen NHG members contributed ten rupees each and the rest our 'ayalsabha' convenor auto driver Saji gave us. On coming back, we taught the rest of the members. Initial investment we made was of Rs 500/- withdrawn from thrift savings. Initially we prepared it

from home and in 2013 we moved to this rented room. After receiving the training, we submitted a project via Micro Enterprise Consultant and got 1 lakh loan and 1 lakh as subsidy. In 2016, we received 1 lakh rupees as part of Panchayath Plan Fund. Using this amount and a portion of our profit we recently purchased machinery worth Rupees 1 lakh and 75000. In addition, we have also gone for training from the Swadeshi unit of Kozhikode.

It was our decision that each of the 15 members should sell 10kg of powder every month...hence we don't need to go for door-to-door sales. Door to door sales were not very acceptable to our family members and especially to our husbands.

Mushroom cultivation

Aged 46, Divya is an NHG Secretary who joined NHG in the formative years of Ks in the Panchayath. But she had to withdraw in three weeks' time as asked by father-in-law, due to many familial responsibilities such as providing food to three labourers in their family managed workshop.

However, she again joined NHG in 2013 as part of the total inclusion campaign of the Panchayath. By then she and husband had set up a separate home as well. At present she is NHG secretary, was ADS president in 2013 and also CDS member in charge for some time. She was also the Gender RP of the Panchayath. Her husband is a government employee and son a degree student. The income generating venture run by her is Mushroom cultivation which in her own words is:

The life changing class that I attended was on mushroom cultivation held in 2009. I went along with my mother-in-law who is a Kudumbashree NHG Secretary. It was a one-day training organised by Krishi Bhavan attended by 22 women from this panchayath. But none of them except me intended to begin and hence all of them gave their seeds to

me. My husband was supportive and so took a linkage loan of Rs 20,000/- and thrift loan of Rs 10,000/- twice and husband invested Rupees 45,000/- to build a shed and other required infrastructure. Now monthly I have around Rs 8000 income. Daily family expenditure is met out of this income. On an average I get Rs 200 daily. Now I look back with regret that I have wasted long years from 1998 to 2013 without engaging in any such venture. Based on the confidence that this has given me I have now begun aquarium and fish rearing too.

Discussion and Analysis

Critical and gendered analysis of the data gathered from the field was subjected to thematic analysis based on the basic research question. Many of the 'taken for granted' norms of gender bias in the field of entrepreneurship are challenged and used as a tool for data analysis. The following section presents the major themes that emerged from the data.

Contextual Nature of Units

At the outset, only few NHG members tried out such small businesses and most were related to snack and pickle making, and such small scale food processing units etc. Such ventures were part of their daily life activities and so special training and skill requirements were not required. One major reason that a member cited for their success was that, being a very agrarian village there were not many shops at that time. This along with the poor financial position of the villagers and trust in the women's products led to many takers for it. As agriculture and livestock rearing is part and parcel of the villager's life and livelihood; livestock rearing was an acceptable venture for the women and men. The success and popularity of these groups inspired other NHGs and members and many followed their way. But, in due course repetition of same business by many groups led to a decline in demand as well as profit of individual groups. Those who branched out their activities into novel products were able to

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continue in the field, while most others left. Gradually, the women were experiencing spaces outside their home, benefits of group membership and also the exposure to the outside world. Majority of enterprises belong to low capital and traditional sectors such as food processing, apparel etc.

Conducive elements

Supportive partners and family members was one of the main decisive factors cited by the women entrepreneurs for their success and continued journey in Micro enterprise. Those who informally began small ventures cited their husband as the source of money for the initial investment they made. The support ranged from mental support to free labour being offered and assistance in marketing. As individuals who did not have any previous exposure and experience of business; this handholding support played a crucial role in building their confidence. Marketing and selling off the products was one of their biggest challenges considering their lack of exposure to the public. It was herein the men played a constructive role.

Location of the Unit

Women's decision to enter the microbusiness sector and the type of business they operate is heavily influenced by the gendered roles and norms that are attributed to and expected of them. Most of the first-generation units of the village were functioning from the members or very adjacent to their home. Nearness to home was cited as the reason why many got permission from their husband to join the ME unit. The gendered private public divide of spaces had a significant impact upon the selection of the location. Through this men ensured their control over women and also non disruption of the traditional gender roles at home.

Decisive Role of Men

Getting the sanction and permission of life partners was a crucial hurdle that most of the entrepreneurs faced in the journey. Men were apprehensive about the ability of the women to run an enterprise, fear that the traditional household gender roles would be compromised, along with the notion of gendered division of labour and the breadwinner concept. Securing permission from husband and family members was one great challenge they faced. The tactics that the women employed to overcome it were to highlight the access to loan and financial benefits that would thereby result in. The chance of securing a loan and making profit was one reason that men gave the nod to join the venture. Women are frequently used as fronts by men to get special financing, subsidies, and other benefits available to female-owned businesses.

The type and nature of enterprise began as well as the internal informal division of labour within the unit pointed to the way gendered division of labour was in practice. The most popular initial units were snacks making unit, cow rearing, hen rearing, mushroom cultivation, hair oil preparation etc. which are all considered domain okay for women and in tune with the traditional gender roles of women and gendered division of labour. Being an agrarian village, livestock rearing was part of their culture and so was comparatively acceptable to the men and family members.

The enterprises which were hailed as the most successful ones such as hen rearing unit and Ksheerasagaram had an active involvement of the men- the male partners of the women members in it. This was in fact a vicious cycle of gender division of labour. The enterprise related works such as buying hen feed, marketing and sales of milk or egg, maintenance of the shed etc. were done by the men. Sales and marketing of the products was one of the main challenges faced by the women owing to their lack of contact with the outer world. Along with this, restrictions to move

out of homestead also made them depend on the men for meeting needs outside the unit. Herein the active support of men was cited as a crucial element for the success of the enterprise.

Economic Benefits as a lure to join

In order to get the consent from husband and family members; women have often highlighted the financial benefits that will occur on joining ME. This included access to loan at reduced rates, gaining profit etc. And this has worked as a successful tactic for many. In case of some others the men themselves encouraged their partners to join Kudumbashree and ME so as to earn the financial benefits. The patriarchal decision-making role was quite evident in many cases. However, over the years; rather than financial gains it had many latent outcomes such as exposure to the outer world, skill enhancement, and empowerment.

Triple Burden

The experience of ME units which faced financial loss, expose the double burden that women entrepreneurs had to face. Many joined the ventures on the guarantee that it would result in financial returns and thereby support the family and assist the sole breadwinner- husband. When the units failed and caused financial loss the women had to face vehement criticism from within the family especially the partner for entering an arena less known to women. This was even worse so as they didn't have any assets of their own to pawn or sell off to meet the loss incurred from the business. Thus, the gendered, financially dependent status of women adds to their financial vulnerability and challenge as an entrepreneur. The gendered image of bread winner men and dependent women add to this. Men being breadwinners have less to fear on losing money. Thus, the resultant triple burden of financial loss from the enterprise, inability to meet the loss by themselves and the resultant criticism from family for having ventured into an arena less meant for women. Due to gender

inequality, women find it more difficult to pursue entrepreneurship than men do, and societal and familial circumstances frequently provide insurmountable barriers for women, even when they have access to finance, capital, and expertise. The findings of the study align with the argument put forth by Ahl and Marlow (2012) that entrepreneuring is a socially constructed doing that remains embedded within the prevailing gendered order of society that privileges masculinity as the dominant mode of entrepreneurship.

Conclusion

Patriarchal societies possess very many challenges for the women in all walks of life and so is the case of business and microenterprise. Gendered norms and values of society intervene in very many ways and especially so in case of an arena less meant for women such as business. This in turn leads to hurdles and struggles in the field. This research was specifically designed to explore qualitatively how the societal gender norms and values impact upon the Micro entrepreneurs of Kudumbashree; especially during their incipient phase. For this a single village study based on narrative method and retrospective data was carried out amongst the micro entrepreneurs of various Kudumbashree units. The findings pointed to the gendered arena wherein the women have to enter and engage in; posing several challenges and constraints. The contextual nature of the units was explored along with the conducive factors as experienced by the participants. The major themes emerged are with regard to the dependent status of the women- financially and otherwise, gendered location of the unit, selection of the type of unit, role of patriarchal; decision making, the vicious cycle of gender division of labour, economic benefits as a lure to enter the entrepreneurial world and the effect of triple burden. The study covering both the successful as well as the unsuccessful entrepreneurial ventures establishes that gender norms do have a say in the experience of women entrepreneurs and need to be addressed in a structural way

for real empowerment to occur and thereby tap human resources that lie either idle or are left midway.

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The Future of Universal Healthcare in India: Challenges and Roadmap to Implementation

Gautam Makwana*

Abstract

India's pursuit of Universal Health Coverage (UHC) is a vital step toward ensuring equitable, affordable, and quality healthcare for all citizens. Despite progress through initiatives like the National Health Policy (2017) and Ayushman Bharat, systemic barriers persist, including low public health investment, a fragmented insurance framework, rural–urban disparities, and high out-of-pocket expenditures. This paper undertakes a qualitative policy and literature-based review to assess India's healthcare system, identifying key structural and financial constraints. It integrates comparative analysis of successful UHC models from the United Kingdom, Canada, Thailand, and Cuba to extract relevant assess India's healthcare system, identifying key structural and financial constraints. It integrates comparative analysis of successful UHC models from the United Kingdom, Canada, Thailand, and Cuba to extract relevant policy lessons. These models underscore the importance of strong public financing, primary healthcare networks, community engagement, and effective regulatory oversight. Drawing from these insights, the paper proposes assess India's healthcare system, identifying key

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and effective regulatory oversight. Drawing from these insights, the paper proposes assess India's healthcare system, identifying key structural and financial constraints. It integrates comparative analysis of successful UHC models from the United Kingdom, Canada, Thailand, and Cuba to extract relevant policy lessons. These models underscore the importance of strong public financing, primary healthcare networks, community engagement, and effective regulatory oversight. Drawing from these insights, the paper proposes a multi-sectoral roadmap for India that includes increasing public expenditure, expanding insurance coverage, developing rural infrastructure, leveraging digital technologies, and strengthening the healthcare workforce. The findings emphasize that achieving UHC in India requires sustained political will, intergovernmental coordination, and evidence-based reforms rooted in equity and resilience. Ultimately, the transformation of India's health system must be aligned with constitutional values of social justice and the fundamental right to health.

Keywords: Ayushman Bharat, universal health coverage (UHC), public health policy, health system reform, rural healthcare access, global health models

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Universal Health Coverage (UHC) is defined by the World Health Organization as the assurance that all individuals and communities can access essential health services without financial hardship (WHO, 2021, p. 4). It encompasses the full spectrum of health services—promotion, prevention, treatment, rehabilitation, and palliative care—and is central to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 3 (SDG 3) which targets good health and well-being for all (WHO, 2021, p. 2).

India, home to over 1.4 billion people, presents a unique and complex healthcare scenario marked by both epidemiological and structural challenges. The country is simultaneously grappling with communicable diseases such as tuberculosis and vector-borne

infections, alongside a growing burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) like cardiovascular disorders, diabetes, and cancer (Reddy & Patel, 2019, p. 183). These health issues are exacerbated by significant systemic gaps—most notably, underinvestment in public health, fragmented service delivery, inequitable access, and a high reliance on out-of-pocket spending (Ghosh, 2019, p. 216; Gupta & Mondal, 2020, p. 39).

Despite the launch of transformative initiatives like the National Health Policy (2017), Ayushman Bharat (2018), and the National Digital Health Mission (2020), disparities in access and quality persist, particularly in rural and marginalized communities (Mukherjee, 2020, p. 114). This paper aims to critically assess the feasibility of achieving UHC in India by examining key structural and financial constraints, reviewing recent government reforms, and drawing lessons from successful UHC implementations in the United Kingdom, Canada, Thailand, and Cuba. Through this comparative policy review, the study outlines a strategic roadmap for strengthening India's health system grounded in equity, resilience, and inclusive governance.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, literature-based review methodology to analyse the state of healthcare delivery and UHC policy in India. Secondary sources were used, including government policy documents (e.g., National Health Policy 2017; Ayushman Bharat annual reports), academic journals, and health datasets from reputable organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the World Bank, and India's National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO). Selection was guided by relevance to core themes such as financial protection, insurance coverage, infrastructure gaps, and public-private partnerships.

Key literature was purposively sampled from works published between 2017 and 2024 that provide empirical or theoretical insights into health system reform, universal coverage models, and healthcare equity. The analysis adopted a thematic framework categorizing evidence into structural, financial, and

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governance-related domains (Paul & Bhatia, 2021, p. 57). Additionally, a comparative lens was applied by examining four international UHC models—namely those of the UK, Canada, Thailand, and Cuba—based on peer-reviewed case studies and government evaluation reports (Bhattacharya, 2020, p. 72; Mishra, 2021, p. 457).

These countries were selected for their relevance to India’s development context and the diversity in their approaches to healthcare financing, delivery, and regulation. The objective was not to prescribe a one-size-fits-all solution, but rather to extract transferable lessons and best practices. As this is a non-empirical review, no primary data collection or statistical analysis was undertaken. Instead, the study synthesizes existing evidence to provide actionable insights for policymakers and scholars engaged in health system strengthening in India.

Analysis and Discussion

1. Healthcare in India: Key Challenges

Table 1: Health Expenditure and Key Indicators (2023 Estimates)

Country	Health Expenditure (% of GDP)	Doctor-to-Population Ratio	Infant Mortality Rate (per 1,000)	Life Expectancy (years)
India	3.0%	1:1511	29.0	70.8
United Kingdom	10.2%	1:356	4.1	81.1
Canada	10.8%	1:391	4.5	82.2
Thailand	3.8%	1:500	6.5	77.7
Cuba	11.7%	1:150	4.3	79.6

Table 1 compares India’s health expenditure and outcomes with countries that have implemented successful UHC models. The stark differences in doctor-to-population ratios, infant mortality, and life expectancy highlights the urgency of increasing health investment in India.

1.1 Underfunded Public Health System

India's public health expenditure remains among the lowest globally, amounting to approximately 3% of GDP—a figure significantly below the 6–8% benchmark recommended for emerging economies (Gupta & Mondal, 2020, p. 38). This chronic underinvestment results in inadequate health infrastructure, outdated equipment, and frequent stock-outs of essential medicines in government facilities. Primary Health Centres (PHCs) and Community Health Centres (CHCs), which form the backbone of rural healthcare delivery, are often understaffed and poorly maintained. Consequently, patients frequently bypass primary facilities and overcrowd tertiary hospitals, leading to inefficiencies and delays in care (Gupta & Mondal, 2020, p. 41).

1.2 High Out-of-Pocket Expenses

Out-of-pocket (OOP) health expenditures account for nearly 60% of total health spending in India—among the highest in the world (Ghosh, 2019, p. 218). Such high levels of direct spending contribute to financial distress, especially for low-income families. Jha (2019, p. 233) estimates that approximately 63 million Indians are pushed into poverty each year due to catastrophic medical expenses. The burden is particularly severe for chronic illnesses requiring long-term treatment, where even minor hospitalization can exhaust household savings. The lack of robust prepayment and risk-pooling mechanisms further exacerbates this issue.

1.3 Rural–Urban Disparities

Healthcare access in India is deeply skewed toward urban centres. While nearly 70% of the population resides in rural areas, less than 30% of healthcare infrastructure is available in these regions (Rajan & Mohanty, 2021, p. 221). Rural healthcare systems suffer from a shortage of qualified professionals, poorly equipped facilities, and limited emergency services. In contrast, urban areas benefit from better-resourced private and public hospitals. This spatial inequality results in delayed care-seeking behavior among

rural populations and reinforces cycles of morbidity and poverty (Rajan & Mohanty, 2021, p. 223).

1.4 Human Resource Shortages

India's doctor-to-population ratio stands at approximately 1:1,511—far below the WHO-recommended standard of 1:1,000 (Singh & Sharma, 2021, p. 125). The shortage is more acute in rural and tribal areas, where health workers are often reluctant to serve due to professional isolation, lack of career progression, and inadequate living conditions. Furthermore, there is a severe deficit of nurses, midwives, and allied health professionals, creating systemic stress on service delivery. Training capacity has also not kept pace with the population's healthcare needs, leading to chronic understaffing in critical specialties (Singh & Sharma, 2021, p. 127).

1.5 Fragmented Health Insurance

Although Ayushman Bharat has significantly expanded insurance coverage for hospital-based care, a large proportion of the population remains uninsured or underinsured. The scheme primarily covers inpatient hospitalization, excluding outpatient consultations, diagnostic services, and long-term chronic disease management (Prasad, 2020, p. 92). As a result, many families continue to bear substantial healthcare costs, especially for conditions requiring repeated visits and lifelong medication. Additionally, the existence of multiple fragmented insurance schemes at the state and central levels leads to administrative inefficiencies and inconsistent benefit packages (Prasad, 2020, p. 94).

2. Government Initiatives to Strengthen UHC

2.1 National Health Policy (2017)

The National Health Policy (2017) outlines a vision for achieving universal access to quality healthcare services through increased public investment, health system strengthening, and strategic public-private partnerships. One of its primary targets is to raise government health expenditure to 2.5% of GDP by 2025

(Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2017, p. 6). The policy places a strong emphasis on preventive care, primary healthcare delivery, and health promotion strategies. It also advocates for the adoption of digital health technologies and standardized treatment protocols to enhance service efficiency and accountability (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2017, p. 8).

2.2 Ayushman Bharat – PMJAY (2018)

Launched in 2018, Ayushman Bharat is one of the world's largest publicly funded health insurance programs. Its flagship component, the Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY), offers an annual health cover of ₹5 lakh per family to over 500 million economically vulnerable citizens (Mukherjee, 2020, p. 113). PMJAY enables access to secondary and tertiary care services across empaneled public and private hospitals. However, the scheme has faced challenges including beneficiary identification issues, uneven adoption across states, instances of provider fraud, and delayed reimbursements. Critics also point out the overemphasis on hospitalization rather than comprehensive, community-based primary care (Mukherjee, 2020, p. 115).

2.3 National Digital Health Mission (2020)

The National Digital Health Mission (NDHM), introduced in 2020, aims to leverage digital tools to create an integrated healthcare ecosystem. Key components include unique Health IDs for all citizens, digitized health records, interoperable platforms, and telemedicine services. The NDHM is expected to improve care continuity, transparency, and administrative efficiency (Chatterjee, 2021, p. 577). However, widespread implementation has been hampered by issues of data privacy, digital illiteracy, and inadequate infrastructure in remote and under-connected regions. Bridging the digital divide will be essential to ensure equitable access to these innovations (Chatterjee, 2021, p. 578).

3. Lessons from International UHC Models

3.1 United Kingdom (NHS)

The National Health Service (NHS) of the United Kingdom represents one of the most comprehensive models of publicly

funded healthcare. Financed through general taxation, the NHS provides universal access to a wide range of services—including primary care, specialist treatment, and emergency services—at no direct cost to patients (Sen, 2018, p. 524). General practitioners act as gatekeepers, ensuring cost-effectiveness and continuity of care. The NHS is lauded for its equity-driven framework and emphasis on preventive services, though it also faces periodic challenges such as funding constraints and workforce shortages. Its centralized structure facilitates strong regulatory oversight and regional accountability, making it a valuable model for countries aiming to provide quality care within constrained budgets (Sen, 2018, p. 525).

3.2 *Canada*

Canada's healthcare system operates under a single-payer model, publicly financed but delivered through a mix of public and private providers. Governed by the Canada Health Act, the system guarantees access to medically necessary services regardless of income, residence, or employment status (Bhattacharya, 2020, p. 69). The principle of portability ensures that citizens receive care even when moving between provinces. While the system performs well on access and equity indicators, it struggles with long wait times for elective procedures and specialist consultations—attributed to budget caps and centralized planning (Bhattacharya, 2020, p. 73). Nevertheless, Canada's ability to separate financing from delivery offers insights into managing private sector involvement within a publicly accountable framework.

3.3 *Thailand*

Thailand's Universal Coverage Scheme (UCS), launched in 2002, offers a compelling model for low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) seeking to implement UHC affordably. Financed primarily through general taxation, the UCS provides comprehensive benefits to over 99% of the population, including outpatient, inpatient, preventive, and emergency services (Reddy & Patel, 2019, p. 183). A defining strength of the system is its investment in strong primary care networks and decentralized

governance, which enables tailored implementation across diverse provinces. Thailand achieved near-universal coverage within a decade, aided by sustained political commitment and adequate budgetary allocation. The emphasis on equity, fiscal sustainability, and service quality makes the UCS particularly relevant to India's context of high population diversity and uneven development (Reddy & Patel, 2019, p. 185).

3.4 Cuba

Cuba's healthcare system is globally recognized for its focus on prevention, public health education, and community engagement. The state provides comprehensive and free healthcare services through a highly centralized, government-run system. Its high doctor-to-patient ratio—approximately 1:150—and community-based family doctor model contribute to early diagnosis, disease prevention, and consistent monitoring (Mishra, 2021, p. 459). Despite economic sanctions and resource constraints, Cuba has achieved impressive health outcomes, including low infant mortality and high life expectancy. The system's strengths lie in its population-wide health literacy programs, robust data collection, and integration of healthcare services into local communities. These attributes make it a powerful example of how socialized medicine can deliver equitable outcomes even in resource-limited settings (Mishra, 2021, p. 460).

3.5 Comparative Synthesis

Each of these countries offers distinct lessons that are highly relevant to the Indian context:

Table 2: Key Features of UHC Models

Country	Financing Model	Coverage Scope	Delivery Mode	Special Features
India	Mixed (public-private)	Limited (hospitalization)	Mixed	Ayushman Bharat, NDHM
UK (NHS)	General taxation	Comprehensive	Public	GP gatekeeping, regional accountability
Canada	Single-payer (public)	Comprehensive	Private delivery	Provincial administration
Thailand	Tax-based	Comprehensive	Public-focused	Primary care, decentralization
Cuba	State-funded	Comprehensive	Public	Community-based, preventive focus

Table 2 summarizes the structural features of the UHC models in the UK, Canada, Thailand, and Cuba. This comparative overview helps contextualize India’s current approach and outlines design features that can be adapted to the Indian setting.

- United Kingdom and Thailand demonstrate the effectiveness of sustained public financing and the critical role of primary care in achieving equitable access (Sen, 2018, p. 525; Reddy & Patel, 2019, p. 183).
- Canada illustrates how a publicly funded system can coexist with private service delivery while ensuring universal entitlements and fiscal accountability (Bhattacharya, 2020, p. 70).
- Cuba exemplifies the transformative power of preventive, community-oriented healthcare and the importance of human resource planning (Mishra, 2021, p. 459).

For India, which faces significant health disparities, workforce shortages, and infrastructural challenges, a hybrid approach that draws on these models can be instructive. Emphasizing public

investment, decentralization, and community health workers—alongside regulated partnerships with the private sector—can enable progress toward a more inclusive and sustainable UHC system.

4. Roadmap for Achieving UHC in India

Achieving Universal Health Coverage in India requires a multi-sectoral and phased reform strategy, rooted in equity, fiscal sustainability, and community participation. Based on the synthesis of domestic challenges and global best practices, the following roadmap outlines six key strategic areas for intervention.

4.1 Increase Public Health Expenditure

India must gradually increase public health expenditure to at least 5% of GDP, in line with global benchmarks for developing economies (Gupta & Mondal, 2020, p. 39). Enhanced investment should prioritize the expansion and modernization of primary healthcare infrastructure, particularly in underserved rural and peri-urban areas. Strategic areas for budget allocation include maternal and child health services, disease surveillance programs, mental health, and outreach in urban slums. Strengthening federal–state fiscal coordination mechanisms—through tied grants, outcome-based financing, and transparent auditing—can ensure equitable distribution of resources and accountability (Gupta & Mondal, 2020, p. 42).

4.2 Strengthen Primary Care and Rural Health

A resilient UHC model must be built upon a robust primary care foundation. This involves upgrading existing Primary Health Centres (PHCs) and Community Health Centres (CHCs) to include essential diagnostics, tele-consultation services, and 24/7 emergency care. Recruiting and training community health workers (CHWs), such as Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs), is vital for improving health literacy, service uptake, and community trust (Patel & Mehta, 2019, p. 167). Empowering CHWs with proper tools, career pathways, and incentive structures can bridge last-mile delivery gaps and improve referral systems in remote regions.

4.3 Expand Insurance and Financial Protection

Expanding financial risk protection is central to reducing catastrophic health expenditures. Government schemes such as Ayushman Bharat should be broadened to include outpatient consultations, diagnostic services, and coverage for chronic and mental health conditions (Paul & Bhatia, 2021, p. 59). Innovations like community-based micro-insurance, health savings accounts, and cooperative insurance models can provide tailored solutions for informal sector workers and self-employed individuals. A unified national insurance framework, with interoperable databases and standardized benefits, would minimize fragmentation and promote efficiency (Paul & Bhatia, 2021, p. 61).

4.4 Harness Digital Health Technologies

India's digital infrastructure holds transformative potential for UHC delivery. Efforts must focus on expanding internet and mobile coverage in rural and tribal areas. Integrating Electronic Health Records (EHRs) with telemedicine platforms like e-Sanjeevani will improve care continuity and reduce geographic barriers (Basu & Kumar, 2020, p. 119). Digital tools should be user-centric, multilingual, and designed for low-literacy contexts. Ensuring data privacy, cyber security, and interoperability is essential for user trust and system resilience. Training frontline workers in digital tools will further enhance service reach and quality (Basu & Kumar, 2020, p. 121).

4.5 Build Human Resource Capacity

India's healthcare workforce shortage is a major bottleneck. Strategies to address this include offering financial and non-financial incentives for rural postings—such as subsidized housing, hardship allowances, and career advancement tracks (Singh & Sharma, 2021, p. 128). Expanding the number of government medical, nursing, and paramedical colleges in underserved states can reduce regional disparities. Moreover, continuous professional development should be institutionalized through online platforms, peer mentoring, and skill refresher programs. Partnerships with

international institutions can also facilitate faculty exchanges and technical up-skilling (Singh & Sharma, 2021, p. 130).

4.6 Enforce Regulatory Oversight

Effective regulation is crucial for standardizing care quality and safeguarding patient rights. Establishing independent regulatory bodies at national and state levels can ensure fair pricing, enforce clinical protocols, and address malpractice (Roy, 2020, p. 44). All private hospitals should be mandated to adhere to standard treatment costs, transparent billing, and ethical practices. Public grievance redressal systems, patient rights charters, and third-party audits can enhance accountability. Health tribunals may also be instituted for fast-track resolution of disputes and systemic oversight (Roy, 2020, p. 47).

Conclusion

Achieving Universal Health Coverage in India is not just a policy aspiration but a constitutional and ethical imperative. It holds transformative potential for improving population health, enhancing economic productivity, and reducing socio-economic inequalities. While India has initiated ambitious reforms—including Ayushman Bharat, the National Digital Health Mission, and increased policy focus on preventive care—systemic challenges such as low public spending, workforce shortages, insurance fragmentation, and rural–urban disparities continue to impede progress.

Lessons drawn from successful international UHC models emphasize that strong public financing, primary healthcare networks, community-based care, and effective regulation are key to equitable health systems. India must adopt a pragmatic, evidence-based, and phased approach to UHC—one that integrates public and private sector strengths while safeguarding equity and access.

Most importantly, the success of UHC in India will depend on sustained political will, robust federal–state coordination, stakeholder participation, and an unwavering commitment to health as a human right. Building a resilient, inclusive, and affordable

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healthcare system will require not only financial investment but also institutional reform, civic engagement, and a reimagining of health governance rooted in dignity, justice, and collective well-being.

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**Institutional Efforts for Empowering Muslim Women: The
Role of Jam'iyyathul Mujahidheen in Areecode Panchayath,
Kerala**

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Abstract

This study examines the institutional initiatives adopted by Jam'iyyathul Mujahidheen in promoting the empowerment of Muslim women in Areecode Panchayath, Malappuram district, Kerala. Employing a mixed-methods approach that combines surveys with case studies, the research analyzes how institutional initiatives have facilitated women's access to education, employment, and community engagement. Central to this inquiry is the concept of agency, highlighting how Muslim women reinterpret religious and cultural norms to assert autonomy and expand their social roles. The findings suggest that Jam'iyyathul Mujahidheen, through its institutionalized programs, has contributed to reshaping traditional gender boundaries by aligning Islamic principles with contemporary aspirations for development. By situating women's empowerment at the intersection of religion,

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community, and gender, this study emphasizes the significance of localized institutional interventions in advancing inclusive development. The case of Areecode Panchayath illustrates a model through which religious organizations can harmonize cultural continuity with progressive social transformation.

Keywords: agency, Muslim women, empowerment dynamics, Jam'iyyathul Mujahidheen, inclusive development

This study explores how such localized efforts have bridged structural gaps, enabling Muslim women to challenge cultural constraints and assert their agency. By examining the intersection of education, religion, and gender, this study seeks to understand how empowerment manifests in everyday life—not only through academic achievement but also through socio-economic mobility and increased decision-making power.

Education is widely recognized as a powerful instrument for promoting women's empowerment and achieving gender justice (Majumdar, 2020). Even in the 21st century, the empowerment of women through education remains a vital area of concern. Education not only transforms individual lives but serves as a catalyst for broader social change. It equips women with the knowledge, skills, and confidence needed to achieve socio-economic mobility, exercise political voice, and assert personal agency. More than a means to personal advancement, education fosters self-awareness, enabling women to challenge traditional barriers and harness their full potential. When paired with leadership opportunities, education becomes a force for transforming societies and economies. As women attain educational and economic independence, they contribute meaningfully to national development—reinforce the principle that women's progress is inseparable from humanity's progress.

Areecode Panchayat, located in the Malappuram district of Kerala, serves as a unique case of how institutional efforts can reshape gender roles and empower women. Long recognized for its emphasis on female education, the region has emerged as a significant academic hub, supported by grassroots organizations

such as the Jam'iyathul Mujahidheen. These community initiatives have played a pivotal role in expanding access to education and enhancing women's participation in the economic sphere, particularly within a socio-cultural context shaped by religious and traditional norms.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

This study draws upon Anthony Giddens' structuration theory to understand the interplay between individual agency and structural forces in shaping women's educational and economic trajectories in Areecode Panchayat. Giddens' concept of structure encompasses both oppressive and enabling aspects, which is crucial for understanding how gendered rules and resources can be productive and foster change (Kahlert, 2012). This duality is illustrated in Malik's (2019) exploration of Areecode's socio-historical transformation into an educational hub. Malik situates the region's shift within a broader context of resistance to patriarchal norms, highlighting how figures like Ayshumma—supported by her father and brother—disrupted traditional gender expectations by pursuing higher English education. The role of community organizations such as the Jam'iyathul Mujahidheen exemplifies how religious institutions, typically seen as preservers of tradition, also functioned as agents of change. Through the structuration lens, this reflects how entrenched structures can simultaneously constrain and enable agency—where institutions not only enforce norms but also provide the tools for subverting them.

Similarly, Haque (2019) personalizes this structural transformation by tracing Ayshumma's educational journey as a symbol of women empowerment. Her family's support, particularly that of Unneen Musliyar and M.T. Mohammed, can be read as a micro-level instantiation of agency acting against macro-level structures of gendered conservatism. Ayshumma's transition from student to educator illustrates the recursive nature of structuration: individual empowerment feeds back into the system, enabling the emergence of new norms and possibilities for others. Haque's

account thus aligns with Giddens' proposition that structures are both medium and outcome of social practices—a dynamic this study closely investigates in relation to women's socio-economic mobility.

Dominic et al. (2020) extend this discussion by linking education to economic agency. Their study emphasises how women's access to education—often facilitated by community initiatives—translates into financial autonomy and greater decision-making power within households. This resonates strongly with structuration theory: women's increasing participation in the workforce is not merely a by-product of educational attainment but a mechanism that reshapes the domestic and societal structures that once limited them. Education, in this sense, is not simply instrumental but transformative—an iterative process through which agency is exercised and structures are recalibrated. Taken together, these studies emphasise the centrality of education as both a site and strategy of resistance, aligning with Giddens' core assertion that social change occurs through the recursive interaction of agency and structure

Methodological Framework

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Four wards were purposively selected from the North, South, and Central zones of Areekode Panchayat to ensure geographical and socio-cultural representation. The sample comprised 154 women, stratified across the zones: 27 respondents from Velleri (South zone), 90 respondents from both Areekode West and Areacode East (Central zone), and 37 respondents from Alukal (North zone). Data collection involved interviews to collect both qualitative and quantitative data. Secondary data collected from published reports, historical records, and institutional archives to contextualize findings.

Qualitative depth was achieved through case studies that documented lived experiences, challenges, and aspirations of women, alongside historical narratives tracing the evolution of

educational initiatives in Areecode. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including percentage analysis, to identify patterns in educational attainment and economic participation. Qualitative narratives were also analysed to explore the socio-cultural dynamics and institutional influences, such as the role of the Jam'iyathul Mujahidheen. By triangulating quantitative trends with qualitative stories, the study bridges macro-level patterns with micro-level lived realities, offering a holistic understanding of institutional efforts of women's empowerment in Areecode.

Analysis and Interpretations

Jamyithul Ulama and its Educational Interventions in Areecode

Jam'iyathul Mujahideen (Regd.) Society has made a mark in the field of education in Malappuram, a district with a low enrolment rate. The society focuses on shaping students with the right attitude and practical skills, helping them face modern challenges confidently and reach their full potential. At the initial phase Jam'iyathul Mujahideen was developed for inculcating religious based educations. When most young people were growing up without access to basic religious education and with little awareness about the importance of learning, the organisation was formed. For the first 50 years, Jam'iyathul Mujahideen focused on uplifting the community by setting up religious and educational institutions. In the early days, the organization faced many challenges. Some locals, influenced by superstition, blind traditions, and the control of religious leaders, strongly opposed these educational efforts. Despite this resistance, the Mujahid organisers continued their mission.

Eighty years ago, on September 20, 1944 (Hijri 1363), the organization was founded by 12 individuals under the leadership of N. V. Abdussalam Moulavi. Driven by a deep sense of religious duty, dedicated Mujahids later drafted a set of by-laws to guide the organization's activities. They also established a General Body, a

Council, and appointed a President to lead the group. On February 23, 1954, Jam'iyathul Mujahideen was officially registered as the third organization under the Societies Registration Act in Kozhikode district.

Despite facing boycotts and resistance, the organization continued its mission with unwavering determination. Today, its lasting impact is visible in institutions such as Sullamussalam Oriental Higher Secondary School, Sullamussalam Arabic College, Sullamussalam Science College, Sullamussalam Industrial Training Centre and Teacher's training college (B.Ed, D.Ed) —all standing as strong symbols of the organisation's dedication and hard work.

In addition to founding these institutions, Jam'iyathul Mujahideen made significant efforts to promote women's education. They worked tirelessly to provide easy access to education for girls, breaking away from the religious superstitions and restrictions of that time. Between 1959 and 1994 alone, over 1,000 students—including many girls—graduated with degrees. The organization also built hostel facilities specifically for female students, making it possible for learners from other districts across Kerala to study and benefit from these opportunities.

Table No 1: Educational institutions functioning under Jam'iyathul Mujahidheen

	Name of the institution	Year of establishment
1	Sullamussalam Arabic College	1944
2	Sullamussalam Oriental High School	1955
3	Sullamussalam Science College	1995
4	Mices Public School	1992
5	Sullamussalam public School	1997
6	Sullamussalam Industrial Training Centre	1998
7	Higher secondary school- unaided	2001
8	B.Ed College	2005
9	D.Ed College	2006

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10	AML School Kozhakkotur	2010
11	Higher secondary School- Aided	2014
12	Sullamussalam Al- fithra Pre-learning School	2015
Total Number of institutions: 12		

The Jam'iyathul Mujahidheen's legacy as a catalyst for women's empowerment in Areecode is rooted in its pioneering educational initiatives, beginning with the establishment of Sullamussalam Arabic College in 1944. Over decades, the organization has expanded its network to span primary, vocational, and professional education, including the recent adoption of Mices Public School (CBSE), reflecting its adaptive commitment to modern pedagogical standards. Institutions like SNLP School, Poonkudi LP School, GLPS Chemrakkatur, GMLP Pullikal, *and the* Govt. Industrial Training Institute—all sustained by the organisation—have collectively challenged patriarchal barriers to education. Notably, the majority of students across these institutions are female, which proves their transformative role in normalising women's access to learning in a traditionally conservative milieu. By providing accessible, quality education within a culturally active framework, these institutions have not only elevated female literacy rates but also redefined community perceptions of women's capabilities. The organisation's enduring investment in education has thus created a self-reinforcing cycle: educated women become role models, inspiring subsequent generations to pursue academic and professional aspirations, thereby anchoring Areecode's identity as an inclusive academic hub. This institutional ecosystem reflects how grassroots religious organizations can reconcile cultural preservation with progressive gender equity, fostering socio-economic mobility while honouring local ethos.

Women’s Educational Access in Areekode Panchayat

Areecode Panchayat shows a progressive trend in women’s access to education, with institutional density and proximity fostering higher enrollment rates compared to neighboring regions. A significant majority of respondents from the Central and Northern zones reported seamless access to educational institutions—from kindergarten to higher education—within walking distance or short commutes, stressing the panchayat’s identity as an academic hub. However, geographic inequities persist: Southern zone residents, particularly women, remain reliant on neighboring panchayats like Kuzhimanna for educational opportunities, highlighting infrastructural gaps in peripheral areas. Notably, the dominance of female students across Areekode’s schools and colleges reflects a broader socio-cultural shift, where community-led initiatives like those of the Jam’iyyathual Mujahidheen have normalized girls’ education. This gendered demographic is both a cause and consequence of empowerment—accessible institutions enable enrollment, while educated women reinforce demand for such opportunities. Yet, the Southern zone’s dependency on external resources emphasise the need for targeted expansion of educational infrastructure to ensure equitable access. Overall, Areekode’s landscape reveals how spatial proximity to institutions, coupled with grassroots advocacy, can catalyze women’s educational participation, even as geographic disparities remind us of the unfinished journey toward universal access.

Table No 2: Enrollment of Female Students in Educational Institutions of the Central Zone (Academic Year 2024–25)

Sl. No	Name of the institution	Total Number of students	Total number of girl students
1	Sullamussalam Oriental Higher Secondary School	262	200 (76%)
2	Sullamussalam Oriental High School (5 th to 10 th std)	2500	1300 (52%)

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3	Sullamussalam Science College UG		950	618 (65%)
	PG		152	128 (84%)
4	Sullamussalam Public School (upto 4 th std)		125	89 (71.2%)
5	Sullamussalam Industrial Training Centre		46	7 (15%)
6	Sullamussalam Arabic College		531	157 (29%)
7	Sullamussalam College of Teachers Education	B.Ed College	100	95 (95%)
		D.Ed College	100	92(92%)
8	GMPUS Areecode (upto 7 th std)		763	407 (53%)
9	Govt. Higher Secondary School (GHSS)	HSS	1000	620 (62%)
		HS	1229	595 (48%)
Total			7758	4308

Source: Official Documents of the Institutions

According to the academic year 2024–25 data, there has been a noticeable increase in the enrollment of female students in educational institutions. The data presented accurately reflects the number of female students in major institutions within the central zone. Notably, courses such as Higher Secondary School (HSS) report 76% female enrollment, while Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) and Diploma in Education (D.Ed) programs show even higher figures at 95% and 92%, respectively. These statistics indicate a significant shift in social dynamics and demonstrate the growing interest of girls in pursuing higher and professional education. The analysis reveals that in nearly all institutions, female students constitute half or more of the total enrollment. This represents a

highly positive trend in the educational landscape and reflects progressive movement toward gender parity in education.

Educational Profile of the Women

Education is a critical instrument for enhancing women's standing in any society. It is essential because it allows women to learn about the world, which helps them improve their position, build positive self-esteem, self-confidence, and the necessary strength to tackle life's obstacles (Yadav, 2022). The table shows the educational status of women in the three zones of Areecode Panchayath

Table No: 3: Zonal wise details of women and their education

Zone	Education	Frequency
North zone (ward No 1)	Not formally educated	0
	Primary	1 (2%)
	Secondary	1 (2%)
	HSS	4 (10%)
	College	5 (13%)
	Professional	26 (70.2%)
	Total	37
Central zone (ward no5 & 6)	Not formally educated	0
	Primary	1 (1.1%)
	Secondary	7 (7.7%)
	HSS	5 (5.5%)
	College	10 (11%)
	Professional	67 (74%)
	Total	90
Southern zone (ward no 14)	Not formally educated	2 (7.4%)
	Primary	2 (7.4%)
	Secondary	7 (25%)
	HSS	10 (37%)
	College	5 (18%)
	Professional	1 (3.7%)
	Total	27
Grand Total		154

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The central zone, hosting the majority of educational facilities, reports the highest educational attainment, with 74% of women attaining professional qualifications such as B.Ed and TTC. Proximity plays a pivotal role: the northern zone, located 3.3 km from the central hub, follows closely, with 70.2% of women holding professional degrees. In stark contrast, the southern zone—4.7 km from the central institutions—faces some educational marginalization. Here, only 3.7% woman has professional qualifications, while 7% of women aged 50+ remain not formally educated, reflecting systemic inequities in access. While socio-economic factors persist, the clustering of schools and colleges in the central zone creates a “hub effect”, enabling easier access for nearby residents. These findings highlight how spatial inequities, compounded by infrastructural gaps, entrench cycles of disadvantage, emphasizing the need for decentralized educational investments to bridge the panchayat’s empowerment divide

Employment Status of Women

Women in Areecode are doing diverse employment sectors—private, government, and home-based—each offering distinct avenues for economic autonomy and societal contribution. The society can march towards development only when it accepts the women participation in workforce and utilizes her ability in fullest manner. This study interrogates to map how employment diversity intersects with Areecode’s broader narrative of empowerment.

Table No: 3. Women’s Employment Sectors

Employment sector	Frequency
Private	20(12.9)
Government	26(16.8%)
Aided	22(14.2%)
Entrepreneur	12(7.9%)
Abroad	1(0.6%)
Unemployed	73(47.4%)

Total	154(100%)
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The analysis reveals a diverse employment landscape among women in Areekode: 16.8% work in the government sector (primarily as teachers and doctors), 14% in government-aided roles, 12.9% in the private sector, 7.9 % as home-based entrepreneurs (e.g., boutiques), and 0.6% abroad. Despite earlier data indicating high levels of education among these women, nearly half of the respondents (47.4%) remain unemployed category. This suggests that socio-cultural constraints, limited access to opportunities, and structural barriers continue to restrict Muslim women's participation in the workforce.

Perception on Preferred Age of Marriage

This study summarizes respondents' views on the most suitable age for women to marry. The majority favored early twenties, citing reasons such as maturity, readiness for family life, and the opportunity to complete higher education. The responses reflect a broader understanding of the importance of balancing education and personal development before marriage.

Table No 4. Perception on Preferred Age at Marriage

Age at Marriage	Frequency
18	2 (1.2%)
19	3(1.9%)
20	13(8.4.%)
21	24 (15.1%)
22	45(29.2%)
23	35 (22.4%)
24	23 (14.9%)
Don't prefer any age	9(5.1%)
Total	154(100%)

This table presents the preferred age of marriage as indicated by 154 women respondents. The data highlights that a significant majority (29.2%) consider 22 years to be the most appropriate age for marriage. According to the respondents, this age

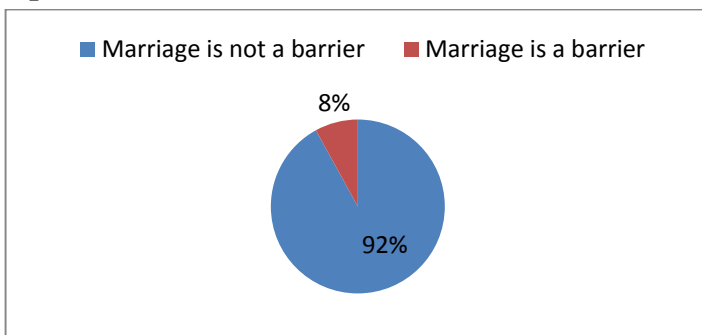
is ideal because it aligns with a woman's psychological and emotional maturity, and typically allows for the completion of a professional or higher education course before marriage. Other commonly preferred ages include 23 years (22.4%) and 21 years (16.1%), reflecting a general inclination toward early twenties as the ideal marital age.

Interestingly, a small portion of respondents 5% reported that they do not prefer any specific age for marriage, suggesting a more flexible or individualized perspective. The data also reveals that early marriage—below 20—is largely unpopular among the participants, further emphasizing the perceived importance of education and personal development before entering into marital life. This finding also connects to broader themes within the study, particularly how family support, early marriage, and educational continuity shape women's empowerment and career progression in the region.

Opinion Regarding Marriage and Women Empowerment

Marriage, as a social institution, holds significant value in human society, traditionally linked to family formation, reproduction, and cultural continuity. Chacko (2003) highlights that deeply rooted cultural practices, such as unequal inheritance, dowry, and violence, continue to negatively impact women's status within marriage and family structures. While it is a central part of many women's lives, its impact on personal growth and empowerment varies depending on socio-cultural contexts and individual circumstances.

Figure.1: Opinion Regarding Marriage and Women Empowerment



In this study, an overwhelming 92% of respondents did not perceive marriage as a barrier to achieving their personal goals or professional aspirations. This perception is largely shaped by their lived experiences—many of them got married in their early twenties yet continued to pursue higher education or gainful employment with the support of their families and spouses. For these women, marriage did not hinder their empowerment but rather coexisted with it, suggesting a shift in traditional narratives that often position marriage as a limiting factor for women.

Conversely, only 8% of respondents felt that marriage posed a barrier, primarily due to challenges associated with pregnancy and childcare. This minority highlights that while societal attitudes may be changing, structural and familial support remains a critical factor in determining whether marriage becomes a constraint or an enabler of women's empowerment.

Empowering Girls through Education- Case Studies

The youth population represents the foundation of a society's future and plays a pivotal role in shaping its socio-economic progress. Their energy, creativity, and innovative thinking significantly contribute to societal advancement and economic development. Therefore, strategic investment in youth education, healthcare, and employment opportunities is vital for sustained economic growth. There is a noticeable shift in priorities among young people, with both men and women increasingly

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seeking financial and educational stability before entering marriage. A large segment of students now prefers pursuing higher studies outside Kerala, enrolling in premier central universities in Delhi and other regions. Furthermore, many aim to enhance their qualifications by pursuing professional education abroad, which often leads to long-term settlement in those countries.

Nasha Muneer, a resident of the 5th ward and an alumna of Sullamussalam Oriental Higher Secondary School, Malappuram, serves as a strong example of how educational institutions can empower young women through academic support and guidance. Nasha completed her undergraduate studies in B.Sc. Chemistry at Miranda House, Delhi University, and is currently pursuing M.Sc. in Disaster Management at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS). As a science stream student, Nasha credits her school with playing a significant role in shaping her academic journey. The institution not only provided academic support to help students achieve strong results but also actively encouraged them—especially girls—to pursue higher education at prestigious institutions across India. During her time, her batch was predominantly composed of female students, which made the school's encouragement even more impactful. The school also made efforts to engage with parents, emphasizing the importance of higher education for girls. Nasha's decision to study at Delhi University was entirely her own, and she regards it as one of the best decisions in her life. She recalls that her batch had 42 students, the majority of whom were girls, and nearly all went on to pursue higher studies. This trend, she notes, marked a shift in mind-set, where girls began to understand the value of higher education. She attributes much of this change to the school's continuous efforts to raise awareness among students and their families about the role of education in women's empowerment. Through her own experience, Nasha strongly believes that every girl should aim to complete at least a master's degree, viewing it as a vital strength in today's society. She rejects the notion that marriage should be a barrier to

education and emphasizes that women can—and should—continue their academic pursuits regardless of marital status.

Thamanna, currently pursuing a Master's degree in History at the Central University of Tamil Nadu, exemplifies the rising trend of students from rural areas aspiring to and achieving higher education at national institutions. She completed her undergraduate studies in B.A. History at Hansraj College, Delhi University. Thamanna credits her higher secondary school with playing a pivotal role in shaping her academic aspirations. The school not only provided academic guidance but also actively introduced students to the opportunities available at Central Universities. Importantly, the school engaged with parents to stress the significance of higher education, particularly for girls. As a result of the school's efforts, a considerable number of Thamanna's batchmates from the humanities stream went on to pursue higher education. This shift highlights the growing awareness and ambition among students, especially girls, to aim beyond basic education and seek academic and professional growth. Thamanna firmly believes that a minimum of postgraduate-level education is essential for today's youth—particularly for young women—as it equips them for greater opportunities and a stronger position in society. She views higher education as a necessary step toward personal empowerment and long-term stability.

Women's Political Participation in Areekode – Case Studies

Areekode, a region known for its rich socio-cultural heritage, presents a complex picture when it comes to women's political participation. Despite educational advancements and a strong presence of women in leadership roles within academic institutions, active political involvement among women remains limited. This case study compiles the perspectives of local women, educators, and political representatives to examine the underlying dynamics of this phenomenon.

According to Malik Nalakath, a local historian, Areekode expresses its political identity predominantly through socio-cultural means rather than direct representation in state or national politics.

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He notes a lack of visible political leadership—both male and female—from the region. Malik points out a widely held belief that education leads to greater political engagement among women. However, in Areecode, this link appears to be missing, possibly due to deep-rooted internalized patriarchy. It can be compared to a kite that appears to soar but remains tethered—suggesting that societal norms restrain women from stepping into political roles.

Despite this, Malik emphasizes that women in Areecode have proven their capabilities through leadership in education. Many have served as headmistresses, leading institutions to prominence—a role he considers more demanding than that of a political representative. This contradiction, he argues, highlights the capacity of women and raises the question: why are they still reluctant to engage in politics?

Fathima P. P., a retired Arabic teacher from Sullamussalam Oriental High School, supports this view by stressing that women in Areecode are politically conscious and socially active, particularly in education and cultural spheres. She argues that while their political participation may not be formal or visible, their contributions have laid a strong foundation for societal development, especially in promoting women's empowerment. She shares a personal story: her mother, a mathematics teacher, empowered her daughters through professional education, enabling financial independence. For Fathima, this act was a powerful political stand—demonstrating how private decisions can have broader societal impact.

In contrast, Mariyuma, a 52-year-old resident, reflects a more passive attitude toward political involvement. She admits to having no interest in active politics and states that she votes only due to her husband's insistence. She adds that most women in her locality do not participate in politics, partly because their husbands discourage them from doing so.

Sulaikha Y. P., the ward member of the 1st ward in Areecode North Zone, offers a different perspective. Despite only

completing her SSLC, she actively participates in local politics. She highlights the value of political representation and encourages more women to step forward. However, she acknowledges that opportunities for women to engage politically remain scarce in the area. Sulaikha affirms that women can effectively balance public responsibilities with household duties if given the chance.

Fidha Nazlin, a postgraduate English student, adds a generational dimension to the discussion. While she is part of a student union, she does not consider it political and expresses disinterest in formal political engagement. She attributes her lack of involvement to limited exposure and lack of familial support, noting that she has never witnessed women actively participating in politics in her locality. As a result, she sees no political future for herself.

The narratives from Areecode reveal a paradox: while women demonstrate leadership and resilience in education and community life, their political participation remains minimal. This disconnect is influenced by internalized gender norms, lack of exposure, and societal expectations. However, the presence of women like Sulaikha shows that with support and opportunity, women can—and do—succeed in political roles. To foster greater female political participation, there is a need for structural support, awareness, and the dismantling of cultural barriers that continue to limit women's roles in the public sphere

Discussion

The findings from the study on women's education, empowerment, and political participation in Areecode reveal a clear picture of progress, challenges, and socio-cultural dynamics. The overwhelming female representation across the educational institutions in Areecode highlights their pivotal role in normalising women's access to education. This trend suggests a broader socio-cultural transformation driven by grassroots religious organisations that have successfully integrated cultural authenticity with progressive gender practices. By fostering environments where female education is both accessible and encouraged, the

educational institutions in Areecode not only enhance literacy rates but also catalyse long-term socio-economic change through intergenerational empowerment. The institutional commitment evident in Areecode thus offers a model of how localized educational ecosystems can serve as instruments of both cultural continuity and gender-inclusive development.

The Panchayat, divided into 18 wards across North, South, and Central zones, shows a significant concentration of educational institutions in the Central zone, which correlates with higher educational attainment among women in that area—74% of whom are highly professionally qualified. While socio-economic factors persist, the clustering of schools and colleges in the central zone creates a “hub effect”, enabling easier access for nearby residents.

The employment distribution among women in Areecode reveals both progress and persisting challenges. While a notable portion is engaged in government, aided, and private sectors—with emerging trends in home-based entrepreneurship—nearly half (47.4%) remain unemployed despite high educational attainment. This disparity points to a complex interplay of factors: entrenched socio-cultural norms, limited local opportunities, and structural hurdles that inhibit the full economic participation of educated Muslim women. The data suggests that while educational access has expanded, it has not yet translated into proportional workforce integration. This highlights the need for bridging this gap through various support mechanisms.

The study also explored perceptions around marriage and its impact on women’s lives. About 29.2% of women consider age 22 ideal for marriage. Interestingly, 92% of women do not see marriage as a barrier to achieving their goals. This attitude, especially among early-married women, reflects shifting mind-sets that prioritize educational and personal growth irrespective of marital status.

The case narratives demonstrate that women’s empowerment is not limited to access to education but extends to

the cultivation of agency, confidence, and long-term aspirations that challenge traditional socio-cultural expectation

However, a key area of concern is political participation. Educated women exhibit minimal involvement in politics and rarely advocate for female political engagement. Conversely, women with lower educational qualifications are more active in local governance, including roles at the panchayat level. This inverse relationship between education and political participation is a critical point of reflection and demands focused intervention.

Conclusion

The case of Areekode illustrates how grassroots religious institutions can play a transformative role in advancing female education and subtly reshaping gender norms within a conservative socio-cultural setting. While increased access to quality education has empowered many women and redefined community perceptions, the gap between educational attainment and workforce participation remains significant. While the Areecode Panchayat has made commendable progress in women's education and social empowerment, active political participation among educated women remains an underdeveloped area. Addressing this gap through education, awareness, and institutional support can enhance not just gender equity in politics, but also lead to more holistic community development. The foundation is strong—now it is time to channel this progress into broader civic engagement and leadership for sustainable societal growth

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Impact of Media on Sexual Behaviour among Juvenile Sex Offenders in Tamil Nadu

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Abstract

Indian cultural norms often discourage parents and educational institutions from openly discussing sexual matters with children and students. The absence of comprehensive, school-based sex education programs and workshops further contributes to a limited and often distorted understanding of sex and sexuality among youth. Media plays a critical role in aggravating these misconceptions, exposing juveniles to sexually explicit content, and influencing risky sexual behaviors. Consequently, many juveniles lack sufficient knowledge to protect themselves from risky sexual practices and to understand the legal and social consequences of related offences. The present study had two main objectives: (i) to examine the perceptions of juvenile sex offenders regarding sexuality and reproductive health, and (ii) to analyse the influence of media on these perceptions and their behavioural consequences. The research was conducted among 176 juvenile sex offenders in borstal schools across various districts of Tamil Nadu, using a census sampling method. The study followed a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative data from a cross-

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sectional survey using a standard scheduled interview schedule with qualitative data from in-depth interviews with approximately 10 juvenile offenders, supplemented by informal interactions with borstal school wardens. The findings revealed that media significantly contributes to misperceptions and exaggerations about sexuality among juvenile sex offenders. Even traditional attire worn by the opposite sex was often interpreted as sexually alluring. Media also provided easy access to pornographic material, with many respondents indicating that addiction to sexually explicit content was a major factor influencing their involvement in sexual crimes. These results highlight the urgent need for monitoring juveniles' media-related activities and implementing comprehensive sexuality education through coordinated efforts by government agencies, local bodies, and families.

Keywords: juvenile, sexuality, sexual crime, media, borstal schools, exaggerations

Juveniles represent the future assets of the nation, yet increasingly, many are drawn into various crimes, particularly sexual offences. The infamous rape incident in Delhi in December 2012 sparked nationwide attention (NCRB, 2022) and debate over juvenile crime and judicial processes. Juvenile crimes registered under the Indian Penal Code (IPC) saw a significant increase of 47%, rising from 22,740 cases in 2010 to 33,526 cases in 2014 (NCRB, 2022), as reported by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB).

The controversial idea of lowering the age for juvenile trial has been hotly debated since the Nirbhaya case. In October 2015, the rape of a two-and-a-half-year-old girl in Delhi by two boys, aged 16 and 17, prompted Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal to propose reducing the trial age for rapes from 18 to 15, sparking opposition from child rights activists.

No juvenile is inherently criminal; it is their circumstances that lead them to commit crimes. The socio-cultural environment, both within and outside the home, significantly influences a child's

development and personality, with media playing a crucial role. Common factors associated with juvenile crimes include poverty, drug abuse, anti-social peer groups, easy access to firearms, abusive parents, single-parent households, nuclear families, family violence, child sexual abuse, and the influence of media.

Based on the latest 2022 data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), here are key statistics regarding juvenile crimes in India:

State-wise Data

- **Maharashtra:** Reported the highest number of juvenile crime cases, with 4,406 incidents.
- **Madhya Pradesh:** Registered 3,795 cases.
- **Rajasthan:** Documented 3,063 cases.
- **Tamil Nadu:** Ranked fourth with 2,607 cases in 2022, an increase from 2,212 cases in 2021. (*Source: The New Indian Express*)

City-wise Data

- **Delhi:** Juveniles were involved in 2,436 criminal cases in 2022, including 92 cases of murder, 154 attempted murders, 86 rapes, and 862 thefts. (*Source: The Print*)
- **Chennai:** Reported 521 juvenile-related cases in 2022, up from 496 in 2021. (*Source: The New Indian Express*)

Data Specific to Tamil Nadu

- **Nature of Crimes:** Most cases involved theft (548), followed by hurt/assault (425), rash driving (208), murder (102), and attempted murder (101). Under Special and Local Laws (SLL), 238 cases were registered under the POCSO Act. (*Source: The New Indian Express*)
- **Juveniles Apprehended:** A total of 3,287 juveniles were apprehended in 2022. Among them, 1,044 were sent home with their parents after advice or admonition, 751 were sent to special homes, and 35 were sentenced to imprisonment.

Juvenile Crimes in India and laws related to it

History:

In India, the first legislation dealing with children in conflict with law or children committing crime was the Apprentices Act, 1850. It provided that children under the age of 15 years found to have committed petty offences will be bounded as apprentices. Thereafter, the Reformatory Schools Act, 1897 came into effect which provided that children up to the age of 15 years sentenced to imprisonment would be sent to reformatory cell. After the Independence, with an aim to provide care, protection, development and rehabilitation of neglected or delinquent juveniles, our Parliament enacted the Juvenile Justice Act, 1986. It was an Act which brought uniform system throughout the country. Section 2(a) of the Act defined the term ‘juvenile’ as a “boy who has not attained the age of 16 years and a girl who has not attained the age of 18 years”. Later on, the Parliament enacted the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection) Act, 2000 which raised the age bar to 18 years for both girl and boy.

Present Legislation:

The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Amendment Act, 2021 is the latest significant update in India’s juvenile justice system. Enforced from September 1, 2022, it brought several notable changes to the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015.

Key changes include:

- **Adoption Authority Transfer:** Adoption orders were moved from civil courts to district magistrates to speed up the process and reduce delays.
- **Redefinition of Serious Offences:** The amendment broadened the scope of "serious offences" to include non-heinous crimes with a maximum punishment exceeding seven years, even if the minimum punishment is less than seven years or not specified.

These amendments aim to improve the efficiency of juvenile justice procedures and provide better protection for children in need. Moreover, in July 2024, the Indian government introduced major reforms to the criminal justice system, replacing several outdated laws. A significant change was the introduction of the death penalty for severe crimes, such as the gang rape of minors. Although these reforms mainly target the broader criminal justice system, they also have important implications for juvenile justice, especially for juveniles involved in serious crimes.

These developments reflect India's continued efforts to balance the rehabilitation of juveniles with the need for strict measures against serious crimes.

While the study utilizes crime data effectively, it lacks engagement with prior empirical and theoretical research on juvenile delinquency. Numerous sociological and criminological studies have explored the causes of juvenile sexual behaviour, yet these researches do not critically analyse or contrast its findings. For instance, previous literature has highlighted the roles of peer pressure, family environment, and socio-economic background, often excluding media as a primary factor. This study attempts to bridge that gap by focusing on media influence. Addressing the gaps in the previous studies through this study is expected to contribute to the academic discourse in this field. Future revisions should consider integrating a broader review of existing literature on juvenile delinquency.

Review of Literature

A significant body of literature has addressed the complex relationship between juvenile delinquency, sexuality, and media exposure. While juvenile sexual crimes are often studied from legal and psychological perspectives, recent sociological research emphasizes the growing influence of media in shaping adolescent attitudes and behaviours.

Murthy and Singh (2021) argue that in India, where open communication about sexuality is restricted by cultural norms,

adolescents rely on digital media for information about sex and relationships. This unregulated media exposure often lacks context or moral framing, which can result in distorted beliefs about gender, attraction, and consent. Their findings resonate with the first objective of this study—to examine how juveniles perceive sexuality and reproductive health in the absence of formal education.

Sharma (2020) and Vyas & Soni (2020) reinforce that television and cinema glamorize romantic aggression and objectify women, which juveniles may mimic in real-life interactions. These media portrayals normalize certain patterns of dominance, body-focused attraction, and unequal gender relations. This connects closely to the second objective of this study, which investigates how media influences these perceptions and, ultimately, behaviour.

Pathak and Agarwal (2022) conducted a case study in Tamil Nadu and found that juvenile offenders frequently cited exposure to sexually explicit media as a factor influencing their actions. They concluded that repeated media imagery can blur the lines between fantasy and reality, especially in the minds of emotionally immature individuals. Likewise, Tiwari and Chandra (2022) demonstrated a statistical correlation between time spent on digital media and increased risk of sexual misconduct among juveniles.

Goel (2020) and Singh & Agarwal (2021) explore the lack of sex education in India and how misinformation from peers and media fills that void. Their research reveals that many juveniles hold incorrect beliefs about reproduction, consent, and disease transmission—some of which were also uncovered in the current study's data. These misperceptions increase the likelihood of risky and criminal sexual behaviour.

Gerbner's Cultivation Theory and Bandura's Social Learning Theory provide strong theoretical frameworks for interpreting this media impact. Juveniles exposed to constant symbolic cues in media environments begin to internalize those symbols as reality (Mishra & Sharma, 2019). In the absence of real-

world correction—either from parents, schools, or institutions—these internalized symbols can drive behavioural outcomes.

While prior research has examined juvenile crime or media influence separately, few studies have explored the combined impact of media on juvenile sexual behaviour in Tamil Nadu. This study addresses that gap, offering region-specific insights that extend theoretical and empirical understanding. The impact of media on juvenile behaviour, particularly concerning sexuality, has become increasingly significant. Media exposure, especially through television, internet streaming platforms, and social media, introduces juveniles to sexually explicit material, often without contextual understanding or guidance. Adolescents, in their formative years, absorb and imitate behaviours displayed in popular media, which frequently glamorize physical intimacy, objectify individuals based on appearance, and downplay the consequences of sexual misconduct. This constant exposure shapes distorted perceptions of normal sexual behaviour. Moreover, platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok contain both overt and subtle sexual content that reaches juveniles with minimal restriction, reinforcing stereotypes and encouraging imitation. Hence, it is vital that media influence is more centrally discussed and analysed when addressing the causes behind sexual crimes committed by juveniles.

Sex Offence by Juvenile is the participation in various kinds of sexual crime such as Rape, Molestation, and Sexual Abusive behaviour by minors (juveniles, i.e. individuals younger than the age of majority). The Indian legal systems prescribe juvenile detention centres, borstal schools and courts for such cases.

In recent years, a higher proportion of youth have been arrested by their early 20s than in the past. According to an analysis by Child Rights and You (CRY) of National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data, there has been a 96% increase in reported child rape cases from 2016 to 2022 (NCRB, 2022). In 2022 alone, 38,911 cases of child rape and penetrative assaults were reported, up from 36,381 cases in 2021. This upward trend, with the exception of 2020, indicates a significant rise in such incidents over the years. In

India, sex crimes committed by juveniles are increasing rapidly; therefore, the problem of juvenile sex crimes holds significance of its own.

Significance of the study:

- The study highlights the direct and indirect influence of media on juvenile's perception on sex and their involvement in sexual crime.
- It aims to create awareness about precautionary measures in addressing juvenile sex offenders.
- The study emphasizes the need for a shift in the societal perception towards informed understanding of sexual crimes.

Theoretical Framework

The study is strongly grounded in relevant sociological theories that explain the influence of media on juvenile behaviour. Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory emphasizes that individuals, particularly adolescents, learn behaviours through observation and imitation of role models. Media platforms such as television, films, and social media serve as powerful agents of socialization, where juveniles repeatedly encounter sexually explicit content, romanticized aggression, and objectification, often portrayed without real-world consequences. Such portrayals encourage imitation, especially in the absence of formal sex education or parental guidance.

Similarly, George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory provides insight into how prolonged exposure to media content shapes an individual's perception of reality. Juveniles consuming media that normalizes or exaggerates sexual behaviour may begin to internalize these portrayals as typical or acceptable, influencing their real-life attitudes and actions toward sexuality.

Additionally, Symbolic Interactionism, as developed by George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer, explains how individuals assign meanings to symbols and behaviours through social interactions. Media content often creates and reinforces

symbols—such as physical features, types of clothing, or behaviours—as indicators of sexual desirability or intent. Juveniles interpret these symbols and construct meanings that shape their social responses.

Together, these theoretical perspectives validate the study's central argument that media significantly influences the perception, cognition, and sexual conduct of juveniles, leading to behavioural patterns that may contribute to juvenile sexual crimes.

Objectives of the study

The study was conducted with the following objectives:

- i) To examine the perception of Juvenile sex offenders on sexuality and reproductive health
- ii) To analyse the influence of media upon the perception of Juvenile sex offenders on sexuality and reproductive health and their consequences.

Methodology

This cross-sectional study was conducted between mid-2015 and early 2017 in Borstal Schools located across various districts of Tamil Nadu (India). The study adopted a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection to address its dual objectives.

All juvenile sex offenders in the Borstal Schools during the study period were included, making the Census Sampling Method appropriate. This method was chosen because the total population was relatively small and accessible, allowing for complete enumeration. Quantitative data were collected using a standard scheduled interview method comprising 30 structured questions. These questions covered demographic information, type of sexual crime committed, time spent on various types of media, choice of media for sexual exposure, and sexual perceptions. In alignment with Objective (i) — examining the perceptions of juvenile sex offenders on sexuality and reproductive health — the schedule included items assessing awareness of reproductive processes, contraception, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and the

concept of consent. Respondents were also asked about their sources of information, such as peers, media, or formal education, enabling the identification of knowledge gaps, misconceptions, and the role of media in shaping or distorting understanding.

To enrich the statistical findings and address Objective (ii) — analysing the influence of media on juveniles' perceptions — qualitative data were gathered through in-depth interviews with ten juvenile sex offenders. These interviews explored in detail the perceived role of media in shaping ideas about physical attraction, body objectification, and sexual behaviour. Informal interactions with Borstal School wardens were also conducted to gain contextual insights into institutional conditions, although these were not included in the formal data analysis.

Research Design and Sample

The research design of the study has been planned according to the purpose of the study. The research design of the present study is descriptive in nature as it focuses on the identification of the media inducing factors of sexual crime among Juveniles and its impact on them, victim and the society.

Total number of Juveniles in Borstal School across Tamil Nadu was 649, which includes convicted, remanded, those who detained under TPDA (Tamil Nadu Prevention of Dangerous Activities), NSA (National Security Act), who are kept in Pre-Borstal School & Borstal Schools throughout the state. Juvenile who committed Sex Crime constituted about 27.11% of the total population. Therefore, all Juveniles offenders of sex crime were selected using Census Method. Data were also collected through informal interaction with the Borstal School wardens.

The demographic analysis revealed that the majority of respondents were aged 16–18 years, predominantly from lower socio-economic backgrounds and rural or peri-urban areas of Tamil Nadu. Educational attainment was generally low, with many having discontinued schooling before completing secondary education. Family structures were often unstable, with a significant proportion

reporting single-parent households, parental neglect, or exposure to domestic violence. In terms of media usage, most juveniles reported engaging with various media platforms for more than three hours per day, with a considerable number exceeding five hours daily. Mobile phones with internet access emerged as the dominant medium, followed by television, social media platforms, and online games with chat features. Media use was largely unsupervised, especially during late-night hours, increasing exposure to sexually explicit or suggestive content. This prolonged and unregulated engagement with media directly connects to Objective (ii), as it highlights how sustained exposure to romanticised, sensationalised, and sexualised imagery shapes perceptions of sexuality, consent, and gender roles, contributing to behavioural patterns leading to sexual offences.

The study was carried out with formal permission from the Additional Director General of Police (ADGP), Prison Department, Government of Tamil Nadu, for visits to the Borstal Schools. Ethical protocols included ensuring voluntary participation, maintaining privacy and confidentiality, and approaching sensitive topics with cultural sensitivity to avoid distress to respondents.

Data were processed and analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Quantitative data were examined using descriptive statistics presented through frequency tables and figures, while qualitative interview responses were thematically analysed to identify recurring patterns and illustrative narratives.

Limitations of the research

Limitations of the study are the following:

1. Indian cultural norms restricted the researcher from asking in-depth questions about sex and sexuality to the selected sample.
2. Due to the fear of legal complications, some inmates may have given false information
3. The researcher had been restricted to video / audio record

the Interview sessions due to which the researcher would have missed some informal details which might be vital for the study.

Analysis & Interpretation of Data

To ensure clarity and better alignment with the research objectives, the collected data is organized into two main categories. The first, considers juvenile offenders' perception on sexuality and reproductive health (Objective i). This data includes their level of awareness about reproductive anatomy, contraception, consent, and sexually transmitted infections. This was collected through structured questions and analysed to find out the misconceptions and media's role in shaping these perceptions.

The second category, addresses the influence of media on the perception of Juvenile sex offenders on sexuality and reproductive health and their consequences (Objective ii). The data is presented through variables such as frequency of media usage, preferred content types (e.g., films, social media, pornographic sites), and self-reported influence of these media contents on their thought and behaviour. Tables and figures used in the study—such as those showing the nature of offences, media preferences, and offender perceptions—are now structured to directly correspond to these objectives, providing a more coherent understanding of the findings.

The study also collected information on the demographic characteristics of the respondents and the amount of time spent on various types of media. The sample consisted predominantly of male juveniles aged between 16 and 18 years, with majority belonging to lower socio-economic backgrounds. Educational attainment was generally low, with the majority having completed only middle school. Regarding media exposure, respondents reported using a combination of television, social media platforms, mobile applications containing sexually explicit content, and print media. Average daily media use ranged from two to five hours, with social media and television being the most frequently accessed formats. These background patterns provide important context for

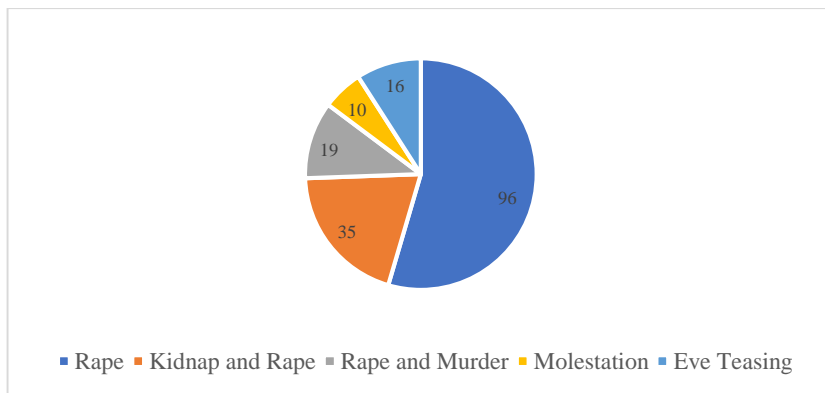
interpreting the findings, as they highlight the socio-economic and educational settings within which media consumption and sexual attitudes are formed.

Table 1.1 – Juvenile Sex Offenders in Borstal Schools of Tamil Nadu (Demographic Info)

Borstal School	Rape	Kidnap and Rape	Rape and Murder	Molestation	Eve Teasing	Total
Pudukkottai	4	3	1	0	1	
Nanguneri	5	0	0	0	1	
Puzhal	25	15	11	5	9	
Vellore	11	7	3	0	1	
Panruti	3	0	0	0	1	
Gingee	4	4	0	2	1	
Paramathi	5	0	0	0	0	
Pollachi	6	6	3	3	2	
Melur	8	0	1	0	0	
Ariyalur	1	0	0	0	0	
Thanjavur	10	0	0	0	0	
Sangagiri	14	0	0	0	0	
Total	96	35	19	10	16	

Source: Primary Data

Figure – 1.1



Source: Primary Data - Supports general context

The above table and figures illustrate the type of sexual crime committed by the Juvenile offenders in various borstal schools of Tamil Nadu.

Table 1.2– Offenders’ Perception of Sexuality and Reproductive Health

Aspect of Reproductive Health	% with Awareness	% with Misconception	Primary Source of Information
Contraception	24%	61%	Media, Peers
Consent	18%	68%	Media
STIs	33%	50%	No formal education
Menstruation/Puberty	45%	30%	Movies, Peers

Source: Primary Data

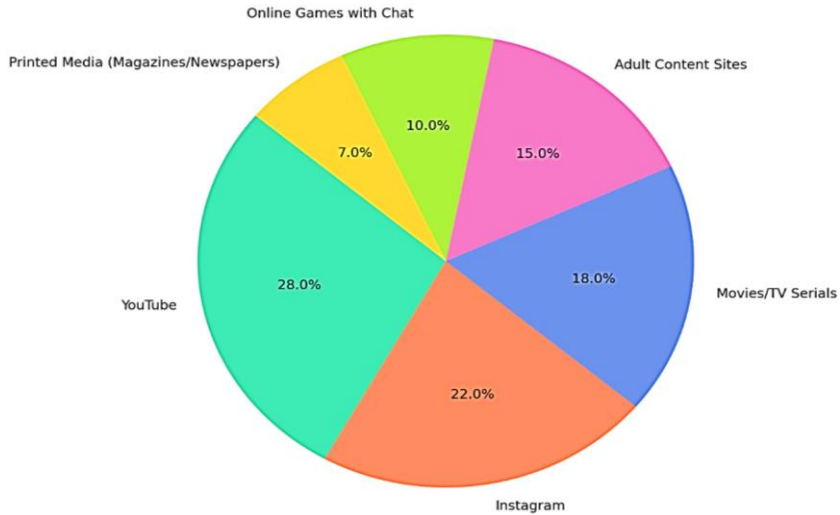
Table 1.2 presents findings on the level of awareness, misconceptions, and primary sources of information related to four key aspects of reproductive health among juvenile sex offenders in Borstal Schools of Tamil Nadu. The data reveals both significant knowledge gaps and a heavy reliance on informal or non-academic sources for sexual information.

1. **Contraception** – Only 24% of juveniles demonstrated correct awareness of contraception methods, while 61% held misconceptions (e.g., believing certain myths about pregnancy prevention). The dominant sources of information were media and peers, indicating that juveniles rarely learn about contraception from reliable, structured education.
2. **Consent** – Awareness about the concept of sexual consent was critically low at 18%, while 68% misunderstood or had distorted notions of consent—often shaped by media portrayals where consent is absent or misrepresented. Media was cited as the main source of information, underlining its role in shaping problematic beliefs.

3. **Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs)** – While 33% knew about STIs, half (50%) had misconceptions—such as misunderstanding transmission routes or prevention methods. Many respondents had no formal education on this topic, which increases the risk of unsafe practices.
4. **Menstruation/Puberty** – Awareness was comparatively higher here, with 45% demonstrating correct knowledge and 30% showing misconceptions (e.g., linking menstruation to non-scientific causes). Most information was derived from *movies* and *peers*, rather than health education programs.

Thus, the above table and graphical representation indicates that juvenile sex offenders possess fragmented and often inaccurate knowledge about reproductive health, heavily influenced by media and peer discussions rather than formal education. Low awareness of consent and contraception is particularly concerning, as these gaps directly relate to risky or criminal sexual behaviour. The high rate of misconceptions across all categories reflects the absence of comprehensive sex education in their formative years, leaving media to act as the default educator—often distorting reality and reinforcing harmful stereotypes.

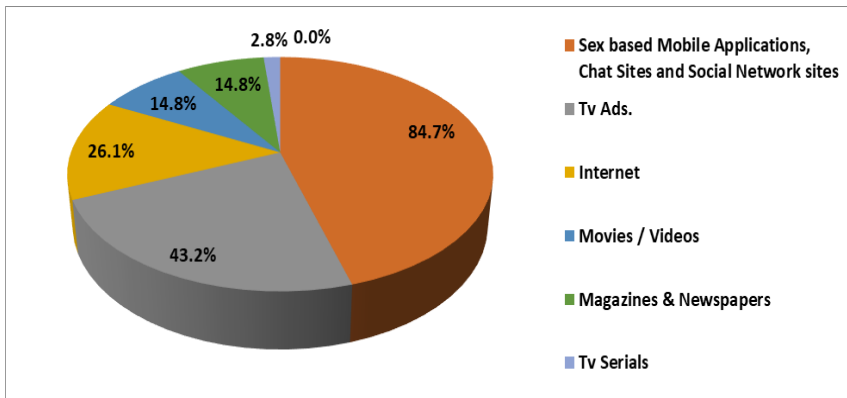
Figure – 1.2- Juveniles’ media consumption patterns



Source: Primary Data - (*Objective i & ii*)

Figure 1.2 shows the distribution of media hours among juvenile offenders provides insight into their overall exposure patterns, directly addressing *Objective - i* of the study. It also relates to *Objective – ii* by suggesting that the nature of the content consumed may be more influential on sexual awareness and behaviour than the duration of exposure. This finding aligns with prior research (Bandura, 1977; Murthy & Singh, 2021), which highlights that specific media content plays a decisive role in shaping sexual attitudes and behaviours among youth.

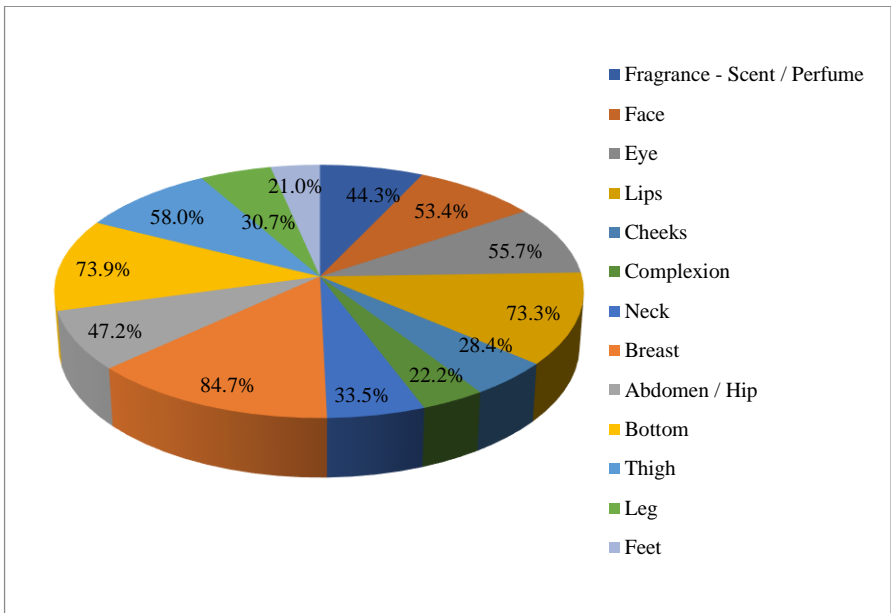
Figure - 1.3 - Type of Media which induces Sex Drive in Juvenile Offender



Source: Primary Data - (Objective ii: Media influence)

Figure - 1.3 reveals the type of media that induce sexual drive among juveniles; social media and mobile applications containing sexually explicit content largely provide exposure to violent sex acts, which may lead to more aggressive kinds of sexual crime. Television advertisements, tele-serials, movie and internet, exaggerates the sexuality of both male and female thereby negatively influencing the juvenile perception of sexual attraction. Magazines and Newspaper provide pictorial depiction of sexuality in both genders.

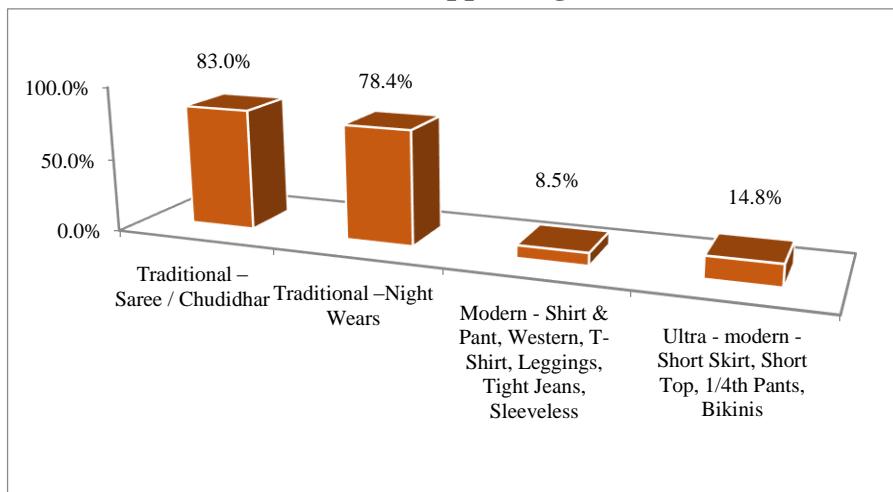
**Figure – 1.4 - Juvenile Offenders attraction towards Victims’
Body Parts**



Source: Primary Data – (Objective ii: Media shaping perception)

Figure - 1.4 explains the nature of juvenile offenders ‘attraction towards certain body parts of the victim / opposite gender, where breast and bottom of the victim are more attracted to them due to the exaggeration of these body parts by the media and Indian cinema.

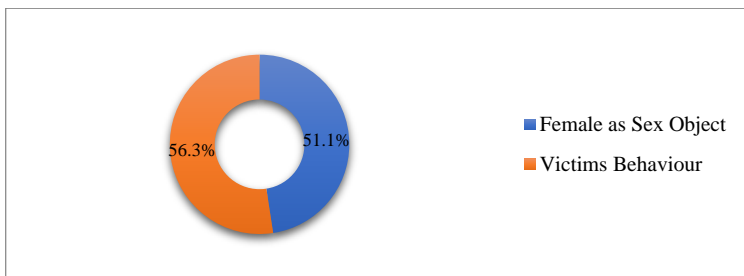
Figure – 1.5- External Outfit as a factor of Attracting Juvenile Offenders towards the Victim/ opposite gender



Source: Primary Data – (Objective ii: Media portrayal and exaggeration)

Figure – 1.5 shows the attraction of Juvenile offenders towards certain types of outfits worn by the opposite gender. The responses also revealed that, this tendency persists due the exaggeration of media in portraying these body parts as sexually appealing, even in traditional attire through item songs, romantic scenes etc.

Figure – 1.6–Juvenile Offender's view on cause of Sexual Crime



Source: Primary Data – (Objective ii: Offender beliefs and media effect)

Figure - 1.6 shows that 56.3% of juvenile offenders attributed sexual crimes to the behaviour of the victim, while 51.1% perceived females as sex objects.

This highlights two concerning attitudes:

1. Victim-blaming mindset – A majority believe that the victim's behaviour provokes the offence, reflecting deeply ingrained gender biases and misconceptions about consent.
2. Objectification of women – Over half view females primarily as sexual objects, indicating that media portrayals, peer influence, and lack of proper sex education may normalize this perception.

Both perspectives suggest a distortion of moral and legal understanding, where responsibility for the crime is shifted away from the offender and where consent is disregarded. These attitudes underscore the need for targeted interventions in media literacy, gender sensitization, and comprehensive sex education to counter harmful stereotypes and promote respectful behaviour.

The qualitative interviews provided deeper insights into this influence. One juvenile stated, "In the movies, the hero never asks the girl; he just holds her hand, and she smiles. I thought that's how it is in real life." Another remarked, "After watching certain songs, I started noticing only certain parts of a woman's body... it stayed in my mind." A third interviewee shared, "We used to watch clips on the phone at night; no one was there to say it's wrong." These narratives highlight how symbolic portrayals in media can become internalised, normalising objectification and blurring the boundaries of consent.

These findings align with previous research. Murthy & Singh (2021) reported that unregulated exposure to sexually explicit media significantly influenced adolescents' attitudes towards sexuality, normalising objectification and victim-blaming. Similarly, Sharma (2020) found that repeated symbolic portrayals in cinema and advertising shape perceptions of attractiveness and desirability, even when exposure time is relatively short. Both studies, in line with the present research, highlight that the nature of media content exerts a stronger influence on behaviour than the duration of exposure.

Conclusion and Suggestions

This study addressed two key objectives: (i) to understand juvenile perceptions of sexuality and reproductive health, and (ii) to examine the role of media in shaping these perceptions and related behaviours. The findings reveal that juveniles frequently possess distorted and incomplete knowledge about contraception, consent, reproduction, and gender roles. Misconceptions were evident across each domain, indicating substantial gaps in both formal education and parental communication.

Analysis of the responses indicates that it is not the sheer amount of media exposure that primarily shapes awareness levels, but rather the nature and quality of the content consumed. Media influence appears to be qualitative in nature—shaping beliefs, distorting concepts of consent, and reinforcing harmful gender stereotypes—rather than simply a quantitative effect of exposure time.

Empirical data from 176 juvenile sex offenders in Tamil Nadu's Borstal Schools indicated that films, television serials, social media, and online platforms often present romanticised, sensationalised, and sexualised portrayals of gender and intimacy. Such portrayals are consistent with Bandura's *Social Learning Theory* and Gerbner's *Cultivation Theory*, which explain how repeated symbolic cues in media environments are internalised as social norms. Offenders' own narratives revealed tendencies to objectify specific body parts or even traditional clothing styles—patterns frequently exaggerated in popular media.

While the study offers valuable insights, its scope is limited by reliance on offender self-reports, without perspectives from victims, non-offending juveniles, or mental health professionals. Consequently, causality cannot be firmly established, though the descriptive findings strongly indicate the need for targeted interventions.

Recommendations:

1. **Integrate Media Literacy Modules** into Borstal School curricula to enable juveniles to critically evaluate and challenge harmful portrayals in media, particularly those that objectify women or normalise victim-blaming.
2. **Organise Parental Workshops** on Digital Monitoring to provide caregivers with the knowledge and skills to supervise juveniles' online activities effectively, while respecting privacy and autonomy.
3. **Formulate and Enforce Government Guidelines** for juvenile internet usage, including age-appropriate access limits, regulation of explicit content, and promotion of safe digital environments for minors.

Future Directions:

Further research should adopt an interdisciplinary approach involving law, psychology, media studies, and gender studies. Incorporating clinical interviews, trauma assessments, and the voices of victims will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the issue and inform the design of targeted, preventive interventions.

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**The Social Interactions of First Year Undergraduate
Students: A Qualitative Analysis**

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Abstract

The study aims to understand the interaction and communication patterns among first-year undergraduate (UG) college students, crucial for their academic and personal development. The students' motivations for communication and challenges faced in peer interactions is explored to provide insights into students' transition from school into college. Data is collected using purposive sampling (n=6) and semi-structured interviews. Thematic Analysis by Braun & Clarke (2006) is employed for data analysis and key themes like discrepancy between real life and media portrayals, fear of social failure, in-group vs. out-group dynamics, and anxiety induced by social and academic pressures were identified. The study found that in order to overcome these

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difficulties, students Started to maintain healthy friendships, adopted more inclusive behaviours in social situations, and tried to find the balance between their academic and social lives. The study highlights that adjustment to college is a negotiation across systems, relationships, and the inner self because it is shaped simultaneously by cultural narratives, peer interactions, and personal development.

Keywords: social interactions, college freshman, peer relationships, qualitative analysis, thematic analysis.

The transition from school to college is a significant milestone in an individual's life, marked by new experiences and challenges, particularly in the realm of social interactions and peer relationships. Understanding these interactions is essential for comprehending how 1st year UG students adapt to their new environment, both academically and personally. This research paper aims to explore the social interactions of 1st year UG students through a qualitative analysis, providing insights into their communication patterns, motivations, and the challenges they face in forming peer relationships.

According to Berk (2018) social interactions are an essential aspect of human behaviour, which influence many dimensions of a person's life and shape their behaviours, attitudes, and perceptions. This process is very important for self-improvement and social development, particularly during major life changes such as entering college from school.

The theoretical basis for this inquiry is enriched by multiple perspectives. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) highlights how social interactions cannot be understood in isolation but are embedded in overlapping environmental systems, from the immediate microsystem of peer groups to the macrosystem of cultural expectations. Cooley's concept of the Looking Glass Self (1902) further emphasises that students' self-concepts are deeply tied to how they believe others perceive them, a process heightened in new and evaluative contexts like college. Mead's distinction between the "I" and the "Me" (1934) adds another layer, explaining

the tension students face between internalised social expectations and spontaneous self-expression. Freud's Psychoanalytic Theory (1923) also contributes by framing the unconscious conflicts, between instinctual drives for belonging, the demands of social conformity, and the ego's mediating role, that shape adjustment. Together, these frameworks provide a multidimensional basis for analysing the socialisation of college freshmen. According to Bogardus (1924) socialisation is a process through which individuals learn to adapt to society and its norms, both internally and externally. Berk (2018) explained peer relationships as an important aspect of individual relationships to grow emotionally and socially. These connections are dependent on socialisation and provide support, a sense of belonging, and opportunities for social learning, which are particularly important for first-year college students navigating a new and often challenging environment.

Goguen, Hiester, and Nordstrom (2010) in their research found that having trust, sharing common interests, and the extent of conflict with a new college friend was associated with GPA and persistence to the 2nd year in college. Ros, Pérez-González, Canvas-Martínez, and Tomás (2017) based on their study concluded that both motivation and social interaction learning strategies have indirect effects on permanence via first year university experiences. Rousta, A., & Bakhshi, H. did research in 2021 to determine adjustment difficulties and needs of first year college students in order to make their transition to college more efficient. Rubin, Perse, and Barbato (1988) in their research found six prominent motives individuals have for interpersonal communication- pleasure, affection, inclusion, escape, relaxation and control. Sari and Handayani (2019) in their research found that social support is positively correlated with self-esteem and both are negatively correlated with perceived stress which is a significant predictor in psychological well-being. Shim and Ryan (2012) in their study found that there are two social goals- approach goal and avoid goal where approach goal promoted adjustment and positive social competence with a drawback of aggression for adjustment

and the latter hindered adjustment indicating negative associations with social competence, popularity, behaviour with positive associations with anxious behaviour. Smith & Wertlieb (2005) in their research titled- Do First - Year College Students' Expectations Align with their First - Year Experiences? found that students with unrealistic high social or academic expectations had lower first-year GPAs than students with average or below average expectations. Sung in his study (2008) found that peer attachment and adjustment to college; self-esteem and adjustment to college have a positive correlation where peer attachment is an important factor. Thoman, Sansone, and Pasupathi (2006) in their research found that social interaction plays an important role in regulating activity interest which is an important source of human motivation, even beyond the immediate activity experiences.

A significant research gap exists in this literature as these studies have explored various factors influencing students' college life - common interests, extent of conflict, motivations, social interactions, social support, perceived stress and expectations in relation to various outcomes like GPAs, academic performance and exit rates. However, most of these have made use of quantitative measures where they may have been successful in providing insights about trends that influence socialization but provide limited insight into students' subjective experiences. Additionally, there is a lack of research exploring how students' coping strategies evolve over the period of time and how affect plays an important role as they interact with various situations, shaping students' decision making and social engagement. This study tries to address these gaps by using thematic analysis of semi- structured interviews to capture students' lived experiences. The significance of the research lies in studying the social interactions of freshmen is important in developing effective support systems for students at an institutional level and developing an insight into the initial interaction patterns which pave the way to long term friendship which sometimes even last a lifetime and hold a valuable space in a student's life.

The rationale of this study is to explore the social interactions of first year UG students of a women's college of University of Delhi to help detect patterns and themes in their socialisation processes as peers are one of the factors of socialization during the developmental years especially of the young adults. Analysing these interactions can show how their environment shapes their early college life. Employing Qualitative Analysis helps with a better understanding of how first years integrate socially, this can help in supporting their well-being in college.

This research aims to explore socialisation patterns of first year UG students in college while detecting the hindrances in the process of socialisation. The purpose of the study is to explore various support systems for students and to review students' strategies for socialisation to develop a sense of belonging within the college community.

Method

In order to understand the social interactions and communication patterns of first-year UG college students, a qualitative research study was planned where the data was collected using semi-structured interviews. Qualitative research helps in studying behaviour and producing descriptive data. It is ideal for in- depth analysis of participants' experiences and social phenomena. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect information. This method involves asking a set of open-ended questions enabling participants to freely express their experiences and thoughts. The interview explored various aspects of social life of first year UG students including their expectations, challenges they faced in making friends, the role of social media and balancing of social and academic obligations. Thematic analysis as delineated by Braun and Clarke (2006) is used to examine the qualitative data obtained through interviews. It is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. This method provides flexibility and comprehends complex social phenomena and patterns within the data. It helps to develop and

filter themes which provides researchers with better understanding of social interactions of first-year UG students. This study is exploratory and cross-sectional in nature. It aims to grasp the reasons and difficulties that students encounter while adjusting to their new social surroundings.

Participant Information: Participants for this study were selected using purposive sampling to meet the requirements of the research objectives, such as age, academic background etc. Six female participants, aged between 17-20 years, were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule. Out of six participants, four were out-station students, and two were day scholars from Delhi. The inclusion criteria specified that students must be freshman from a college of University of Delhi and the exclusion criteria ensured that only students who provided informed consent were included, prioritising confidentiality and the voluntary nature of participation.

Ethical Considerations: Ethical guidelines were followed throughout the research process which includes obtaining informed consent from the participants and ensuring confidentiality and anonymity. Before conducting the interviews, participants were rightly informed about the study's purpose, procedures and of their right to withdraw from the interview at any time.

Key Findings

The themes which emerged through thematic analysis of the interviews have been identified, defined and discussed in the following section.

Results Table 1
(Def=Definition)

CODES	SUB THEMES	THEMES
Big Friend Group with Various Backgrounds Exploring New Places Developing Elaborate Social Network Life to be Very Outgoing and Fun	Discrepancy Between Real Life and Media Portrayals (Def: A disparity that participants saw between their actual college experiences and the	1.Social Expectations and Reality (Def: An experience of disillusionment as stated by the participants)

<p>Life Nothing Like Movies</p> <p>Making Friends Was Difficult</p> <p>Difficult to Relate and Build Close Relationships</p> <p>Fear of How They Perceive You</p> <p>Fear of Being Liked/Disliked by Peers</p>	<p>standards established by media portrayals)</p> <p>Fear of Social Failure (Def: Participants' feelings of anxiety at the risk of social rejection or not fitting in)</p>	
<p>Subjective Judgements of Social Inclusivity and Exclusivity</p> <p>Formation of Social Cliques</p> <p>Difficulty in Group Projects</p> <p>Fear of Staying in a New City with New People</p> <p>Fear to Adapt To a New Environment</p> <p>Benefits of Gender Homogeneity</p> <p>Sense of Safety</p> <p>Sense of Protection</p> <p>Seamless Communication</p> <p>Social Identity and Gender Affiliation</p> <p>Physical freedom in girls' college</p> <p>Freedom of lifestyle</p> <p>Freedom of action</p>	<p>In-Group vs. Out-Group Dynamics (Def: Participants' observations of the differences and interactions between individuals who are considered to be members of their social group (in-group) and those who are not (out-group)</p> <p>Sense of Safety Due to Gender Homogeneity (Def: The participants' expressed sense of security while interacting in social settings where the majority of people are of the same gender, i.e., women)</p>	<p>2.Group Dynamics and Social Integration (Def: Navigating through the challenges of creating and sustaining social groupings)</p>
<p>Cultural Sensitivity and Adaptation to Diverse Backgrounds</p> <p>Clash of Opinions and Values</p> <p>New, Different, and Diverse Places</p> <p>Empathy Development</p> <p>Acceptance of Diverse Perspectives</p>	<p>Uncertainty in Inter-Cultural Dynamics (Def: The participants' hesitance when attempting social encounters with people from various cultural backgrounds)</p> <p>Adapting To Diverse Backgrounds (Def: The manner of individuals adjustment with peers from diverse</p>	<p>3.Navigating Diversity in Social Interactions (Def: Interacting and adjusting to people from different cultures and backgrounds)</p>

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<p>Swaying to different cultures</p> <p>Required a lot of communication</p> <p>Paying Close Attention To Group Dynamics and its Effect</p> <p>Recognition of Plurality of Views</p> <p>Friends by Choice</p> <p>More Maturity, Clarity of Thoughts</p> <p>Setting Priorities</p> <p>Acknowledgement of the Importance of Harmonious Social Relations</p> <p>Balancing Responsibili</p>	<p>cultural, financial, and educational backgrounds)</p> <p>Critical Evaluation of Relationships with Peers (Def: The process undertaken by participants to assess and scrutinise their relationships with peers, including friendships and acquaintances, in terms of mutual support and trustworthiness)</p> <p>Developing Empathy and Cultivating Acceptance (Def: The development shown in participants throughout as they cultivate a welcoming mindset towards others with different viewpoints and experiences while learning to comprehend and share the emotions of others)</p>	
<p>Pressure to Excel Academically</p> <p>Academic Workload Pressures</p> <p>Inclined more towards academics.</p> <p>Mental Fatigue from Academic Demands</p> <p>Positive Attitude Towards Learning. But Difficulty Exhibiting Academic Interests</p> <p>Difficulty Balancing Academic Stress and Coursework Load</p>	<p>Anxiety experienced due to Social and Academic Pressures (Def: The tension and stress that participants felt as a result of having to balance the demands of both their academic work and social integration)</p> <p>Struggles in Prioritization Between Academic Work and Social Pursuits (Def: Participants' struggles to strike a balance between their social obligations and their academic obligations)</p>	<p>4. Academic and Social Pressures (Def: The stress experienced by the participants by both their social and academic expectations)</p>
<p>Can't Trust with Secrets and Problems</p>	<p>Difficulty in Identifying Genuine Friendships</p>	<p>5. Authenticity and Social Boundaries</p>

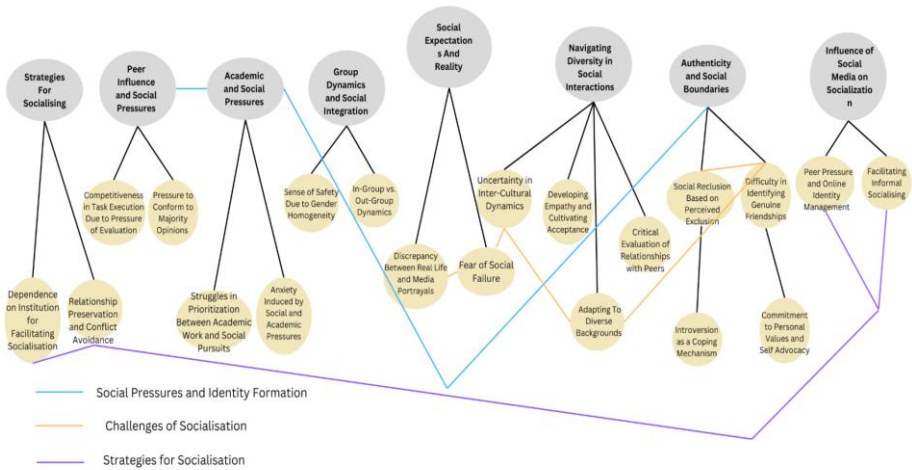
<p>Setting Boundaries to Preserve Authenticity Cognitive Dissonance and Boundary Setting</p> <p>Strategies of Self-Regulation Self-Discipline and Goal Setting Efficient Time Management Balancing Personal and Professional Life Self-Awareness Filtering Out Relationships Focus on Personal Growth Self-Priority and Care</p> <p>Conflict of Interest Lack of Trust Less Social Engagement Based on Prior Negative Experiences Selective Avoidance in Socialising</p> <p>Increased Consciousness Selective Engagement with Peers Connections Only for Work Avoiding Over-Involvement</p>	<p>(Def:Participants' inability to distinguish genuine friendships from opportunistic ties in their college social circles, which left them doubtful of their ability to build lasting relationships)</p> <p>CODE UNDER SUB-THEME</p> <p>Commitment to Personal Values and Self Advocacy (Def:Participants demonstrated a commitment to upholding their own ideas and ideals and making attempts to advocate for themselves in a variety of social and academic circumstances)</p> <p>Social Reclusion Based on Perceived Exclusion (Def: The withdrawal initiated by participants as a response to feeling excluded or marginalised within their social environment, leading to reduced social interaction and engagement)</p> <p>CODE UNDER SUB-THEME</p> <p>Introversion as a Coping Mechanism (Def: The participants' preference for and</p>	<p>(Def:Techniques to be true to oneself when interacting with others)</p>
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	<p>dependence on introverted behaviours—like selective socialising or solitude—as a coping mechanism for handling the pressures and difficulties of social interactions)</p>	
<p>Peer Pressure Wanting to Feel Included Compromising Values Faking Interests Psychological Toll of Group Performance Peer Comparison and Benchmarking Performance Anxiety Strategies for Skill Demonstration Perceived Evaluation and Pressure Navigating Moral Dilemmas</p> <p>Lack of Recognition and Credit in Group Settings Differential Role Perception Nature of Dominance and Marginalisation Power Dynamics in Group Settings Increased Consciousness One Person Taking the Whole Responsibility</p>	<p>Pressure to Conform to Majority Opinions (Def: The pressure participants experienced to conform their attitudes and behaviours to the dominant ideas in their social circles, frequently leading to a compromise of own values or perspectives)</p> <p>Competitiveness in Task Execution Due to Pressure of Evaluation (Def: The heightened performance-driven behaviour exhibited by participants in response to the pressure of being evaluated or assessed academically or socially)</p>	<p>6. Peer Influence and Social Pressures (Def: The impact of peer pressure on social behaviour and decision-making)</p>
<p>Avoiding Disputes to Preserve Friendships Cautious Decision Making Resolution Through Majority Consensus Connections with Seniors Meeting People from</p>	<p>Relationship Preservation and Conflict Avoidance (Def: The tactics used by participants to preserve harmony and prevent interpersonal disputes in their social connections; frequently, peacekeeping</p>	<p>7. Strategies For Socialising (Def: Methods for handling social interactions and settling disputes)</p>

<p>Different Colleges and Backgrounds in Fest Acquirement of Information from Different Fields and Works Strong Connections and Good Friends in Society Positive impact of college events Easier Opportunities for Socialising Interdepartmental Connections</p>	<p>is given priority over voicing disagreement) Dependence on Institution for Facilitating Socialisation (Def: Participants' dependence on educational institutions and planned events to promote and enable social connections, which aids in their integration and socialisation within the campus community)</p>	
<p>Enhancing Social Connections Beyond Campus Continuous Communication Impact on Communication Styles Instant Connectivity Aiding Instant Connectivity Discovering Events, Getting Updates from Social Media Helping Build Connections Initiating Conversations and Knowing Others' Interests Finding Your Circle Significant Role of Instagram in Making Connections Navigating Online Peer Pressure Managing Online Identities</p>	<p>Facilitating Informal Socialising (Def: The impact of social media platforms on participants' first-year college socialisation experiences by facilitating informal and casual social connections) Peer Pressure and Online Identity Management (Def: The influence exerted by peers through online platforms, impacting participants' attitudes and self-presentation as they navigate social pressures in virtual spaces)</p>	<p>8. Influence of Social Media on Socialisation (Def: Social media's role on relationships and social interactions)</p>

Thematic Map



Interpretation and Discussion

Theme 1: Social Expectation and Reality

One of the major themes identified is the ‘Discrepancy between social expectations and reality’. The media tends to glorify college life which leads students to set unrealistic expectations of a happening social life for themselves. Many students experienced a sense of disillusionment since these expectations were not met as is evident when spoken to participant two when she said “It feels like people are judgmental and it's not, it's nothing like movies.” Participants frequently felt judged by others and noticed that others were not honest in social situations. This lead students becoming concerned about how other people saw them and if they would fit in with their peers “What they will be thinking of me, whether they like me or not and the perception they'll have of me” remarked participant one. Because students feared not fitting in, they were unable to form a broad social network and this increased their feelings of loneliness. Jennifer R. Keup's (2007) explored students' first impressions and expectations of college. It was found that

students' initial assumptions about college, including interpersonal and personal dynamics, were unmet highlighting severe disillusionment, particularly regarding roommate relationships. Thus, in the initial days students usually are more cautious and take time to initiate interaction.

Theme: 2 Group Dynamics and Social Integration

Another theme that was identified was 'Group dynamics and social integration'. It was difficult for students to adjust and make new friends because of pre-established social groups. Many students faced In-Group and Out-Group Dynamics which is defined by Tajfel (1978) as 'A group to which a person belongs and with which the person feels a sense of identity or belonging' and 'A group to which a person does not belong and with which the person does not feel a sense of identity or belonging.' This can be inferred from participant one's response, "The groups have already been formed and nobody really talks outside of their groups to anybody else." It can be inferred that students face obstacles in breaking into in-groups and expanding their social circles. Gender homogeneity was another sub-theme. Students reported feeling more comfortable and secure in a uniform gender setting as mentioned by participant three "I would say that, here there is a lot of freedom that you can do whatever you want." Gender similarity also seems to promote communication and increase a sense of community.

Theme 3: Navigating Diversity in Social Interaction

Another theme was 'navigating diversity in social interactions. It was a challenge and an opportunity for students to adjust to peers who came from different backgrounds as compared to their own. This required them to be more understanding amongst their social circles.

One important feature was the difference in opinions and values, "In a new place, people come from different areas and backgrounds, so you don't really know what opinions they have. Some opinions might clash with yours" said participant no. one. As it was exciting for students to socialise with people from diverse backgrounds, they not only developed larger perspectives but also

stepped outside of their comfort zones. In a study by David W. Haines (2007) it was seen that students recognized how diversity could benefit them while noting the difficulties of dealing with diversity in higher education settings. They did so by accepting that being exposed to different viewpoints had a positive effect on their education and helped in their personal growth.

Empathy development and cultivating acceptance which refers to learning to share the emotions of others and students' journey of welcoming different viewpoints. Students acknowledged the importance of harmonious social relations and the need to balance various responsibilities. This can be inferred from participant two's statement "The views and beliefs are different and it has taught me to be more understanding and accepting, and it has helped me to be more empathetic."

The next sub-theme is that of 'Critical evaluation of relationships with peers' which refers to students' pattern of assessing their relationships with peers, in terms of mutual support and trustworthiness. Based on individual experiences students devised their own evaluation of relationships which included recognising plurality of views and need for transparent communication. Many mentioned having learnt the importance of making friends by choice.

Theme 4: Academic and Social Pressures

The fourth theme was 'Academic and social pressure' which refers to the stress experienced by participants due to their social and academic expectations. Under this theme the first sub-theme was Anxiety experienced due to Social and Academic Pressures which explains the stressful situation students were in because they had to balance the demands of both their academic work and social integration as is evident from participant no. one's response, "It's hard to manage it with the academic stress and the different work." Misra, Crist and Burant (2003) in their research found that women in comparison to men exhibited higher reactions to stressors. It predicted that high levels of life stress and lower

levels of social support led to higher levels of academic stressors which in turn predicted greater reactions to stressors.

The second sub-theme identified was ‘Struggles in prioritisation between academic work and social pursuit’ which shows participants' struggles to strike a balance between their social obligations and their academic obligations. Though they expressed the overwhelming impact it had on them, they also showed a positive outlook towards learning from changes. From the response given by participant two:

I am pursuing something that I personally have a lot of interest in. So, the academic obligation does not feel like a hefty task to deal with. But sometimes it feels very difficult to handle, and the entire nature of college feels very mentally exhausting. So, yes, it does have an impact on the mental condition of the student.

It can be inferred that the student is still in the learning stage of striking a balance between their personal and academic life.

Theme 5: Authenticity and Social Boundaries

The fifth theme, ‘Authenticity and social boundaries’ refers to techniques employed by students to preserve one’s identity while interacting with others. Students seem to have experienced cognitive dissonance when they encountered inconsistency in thoughts and actions amongst their peers which led them to uphold their authenticity and social boundaries. Festinger explained that “cognitive dissonance can be seen as an antecedent condition which leads to activity oriented toward dissonance reduction just as hunger leads to activity oriented toward hunger reduction” (Festinger, 1957, p.3).

The first sub theme, 'Difficulty in identifying genuine friendships' refers to the inability to distinguish between genuine and superficial friendships. Due to trust issues and value conflicts, they sought to preserve their authenticity by drawing clear boundaries within relationships.

One participant emphasised conscious relationship filtering and prioritisation:

If you find good people that make you feel nice, that make you feel good, stick with them, keep them close and also maintain distance from people that don't have anything positive to offer because then you'll just be wasting energy on the wrong people ...make wise decisions about when to go out and how to manage your social life with your academics by setting priorities and introspecting.

The second sub-theme, 'Social reclusion based on perceived exclusion' refers to the withdrawal of participants due to feeling of exclusion from their social environment and fear of betrayal. This can be evident from participant two's statement:

I just felt either I can protect my individuality or I can lie about my opinion to be accepted, and it happens a lot. So, I, on a personal level, try to pull away from such situations. And I create boundaries with these people because I think this has affected my desire to socialise.

It is supported by Rotter's (2010) findings that experiencing trust violations can lead to social withdrawal of individuals due to fear of further betrayal.

They become selective in socialisation. This helped them avoid situations where they previously felt self-conscious. The same is evident from participant two's statement "It made me a little protective of who I let around me. Because a lot of the time people don't behave the way they pretend. So, yeah, it made me a little more conscious, and it made me more introverted in nature" as well as participant six "The most valuable lessons that I learned is to not get too much involved in anything and set your priorities on top."

Theme 6: Peer Influence and Social Pressures

The sixth theme, 'Peer influence and social pressure' refers to the impact of peer pressure on social behaviour and decision-making. The first sub-theme, 'Pressure to conform to majority opinions' describes the pressure participants experienced to conform their attitudes and behaviours to the dominant ideas in

their social circles, frequently leading them to compromise their own values or perspectives. Santee and Maslach (1982) found that self-perspective, private self-consciousness, individuation, and self-esteem are directly related to dissent and inversely related to conformity whereas public social consciousness, social anxiety, shyness and self-monitoring were predicted to be directly related to conformity and inversely related to dissent. They also found that the relationship of self-concept to dissent and conformity is expected to be stronger when peer opinion is unanimous than when it is divided.

The second sub theme of ‘Competitiveness in task execution due to pressure of evaluation’ refers to the heightened performance-driven behaviour exhibited by students because of the pressure of being evaluated academically as well as socially leading to high stress and performance anxiety. It is consistent with Yuyi Liu’s (2022) findings that a large number of students have academic pressure, employment pressure and emotional pressure and about 67 per cent of the students find that their academic qualifications are inferior to those of their peers, resulting in anxiety and feeling of inferiority.

Theme 7: Strategies for Socialising

The seventh theme, ‘Strategies for socialising’ refers to the methods of operating social interactions and settling disputes. The first sub-theme, ‘Relationship preservation and conflict avoidance’ refers to the tactics used by participants to preserve harmony and prevent disputes within their social circles. Most students initially avoided disputes to preserve friendship and made cautious decisions, as participant two states: “There have been a lot of disputes and conflicts within the entire college batch because the views and beliefs are different, and people are very protective of their opinions and ideas. So, whenever such issues happen, we usually take a majority route.”

The second sub-theme, ‘Dependence on institution for facilitating socialisation’ explains students’ dependence on the college and the events it planned to socialise with their peers. These

events helped students meet people from diverse backgrounds and form strong friendships, enhancing their on-campus experience. This is illustrated by the statement of participant no. three and four respectively “Departmental events and the society’s festival or events helped me a lot you get to meet a lot of people from different backgrounds to get more” and “I feel like, more than I have been connected with my classmates, the batchmates from society have been more of friends for me.”

Theme 8: Influence of Social Media on Socialisation

The eighth theme, ‘Influence of social media on socialisation’ refers to the social media's role on relationships and social interactions. The first sub theme, ‘Facilitating informal socialising’ explains the impact that social media platforms have on fostering informal social connections amongst college freshmen through updates about events and friendships beyond campus, aiding them with instant connectivity as is evident from participant no. one’s statement, “I think social media played a vital role in my social life in college in the first year because when I followed people on their socials that created a baseline where we could talk outside of college and make plans together.”

The second sub-theme, ‘Peer pressure and online identity management’ describes the influence exerted by peers through online platforms, impacting participants' attitudes and self-presentation. Even though students reported social media’s help in forming connections, they faced difficulty in connecting with peers at a deeper level due to false online identities. This is evident from participant no. four’s statement - “Instagram plays a significant role in social connections, and it has played a role in my life too. Once my connections were established on social media, I deactivated my social media accounts.” Steinberg, L. (2005) in his study found that peer pressure significantly influences adolescent behaviour and decision-making, highlighting the fact that during adolescence individuals are particularly susceptible to peer influence due to ongoing cognitive and emotional development.

This study highlights how first-year students' social experiences are shaped by multiple forces which are external and internal. One of the most striking findings was the difference between how college life is portrayed in the media and the realities students encountered. Bronfenbrenner's macrosystem (1979) helps explain how cultural narratives and media shape expectations before students even arrive on campus. While Cooley's looking-glass self (1902) illustrates how they judge themselves against these imagined reflections, often leading to disillusionment.

Fear of judgment and social failure was another prominent challenge. Within the microsystem, peer interactions directly influenced feelings of belonging. Mead's distinction between the "I" and the "Me" (1934) offers a useful lens here. The "Me," internalising social expectations, heightened anxiety, while the "I" surfaced in authentic, spontaneous connections. Freud's psychoanalytic model further clarifies how the ego worked to balance the superego's pressure to conform with the id's impulses for social gratification.

In-groups and out-groups strongly shaped how students saw themselves, underscoring the mesosystem's importance in peer dynamics. At the same time, diversity on campus encouraged growth. Students who engaged with multicultural groups broadened their perspectives, reflecting Mead's idea of the "generalised other". This showed how socialisation in diverse settings fosters empathy and maturity.

Balancing academics with social life was another challenge. This reflected the interplay between mesosystem and exosystem demands, where institutional pressures met personal coping strategies. Students who managed these roles effectively demonstrated how the ego mediates between inner drives and external expectations.

The struggle to form genuine friendships and resist conformity further highlighted the need for initiative. Cooley's looking-glass self explains how students evaluated relationships through peers' responses. Mead's framework highlights the tension

between internalised expectations and the assertion of individuality.

Social media adds another layer to these processes. As it functioned at the microsystem level by shaping daily peer exchanges. It also functioned at the macrosystem level, by reflecting broader cultural and technological trends. Cooley's theory is particularly relevant here because students constructed their self-concept through the imagined judgments of their online audiences.

Finally, personal development ran across all themes. Bronfenbrenner's chronosystem shows how identity unfolded over time and through transitions. Mead's theory underscores how perspective-taking shaped maturity. Freud's framework highlighted how adolescence itself is a stage marked by negotiation between inner conflict and social demands.

Taken together, these findings reveal that adjustment to college is not individual or purely social. It is a negotiation across systems, relationships, and the inner self because it is shaped simultaneously by cultural narratives, peer interactions, and personal development. It was found that in order to overcome these difficulties students started to maintain healthy friendships, be more inclusive in social situations, and try to find the balance between their academic and social lives.

Conclusion

The aim of the study was to examine the social experiences of college freshmen using thematic analysis of the semi structured interviews of the participants. Themes such as the differences between expectations and reality, fear of social failure, in-group and out-group patterns, and personal development and socialisation were found. It was found that in order to overcome these difficulties students started to maintain healthy friendships, be more inclusive in social situations, and try to find the balance between their academic and social lives. They learned that being true to themselves regardless of external factors helped them form meaningful friendships and feel more comfortable in new

environments. These characteristics provide useful direction for future students as they begin their own college journeys.

Implications of the study and Future directions:

Through this research, it was aimed to explore the social dynamics of first-year college students, offering valuable insights for educators, administrators, and policymakers to support students' social and academic integration. Understanding these interactions can lead to the development of strategies and interventions that enhance students' overall college experience, fostering a supportive and inclusive campus environment. There is a scope for further research that is needed to explore the longitudinal development of the coping strategies and the role of institutional practices on students' social and academic progress.

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**Negotiating Freedom and Unfreedom: Marwari Women in
Family-owned Business and Entrepreneurship**

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Abstract

Women in India have been and continue to remain unfree due to the overarching patriarchal mindset across caste, class, community and religion. Economically men and women represent two distinct categories where the former is placed at a superior material position than the later. The Marwari community in India which is known for their acute materialistic orientation draws a rigid binary between participation of men and women in the workforce. While Marwari men are known for their business acumen, women live in unfreedom as they are restricted to only household chores and motherhood. Women are alienated from their own freedom of choosing a career of their choice, engaging in employment outside their family domain with strangers or taking up a salaried job. Though with changing times, Marwari women are negotiating their rights to exercise their agency in taking to entrepreneurship and family business alongside their fathers and brothers in urban areas, the hegemonic patriarchal discourse does not offer complete freedom to women. Women's agency continues to be structured by the society reinforcing their unfreedom. The study tries to understand how Marwari women are embracing this

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dialectical relationship between domination and subordination in defining their material position in everyday life. The study is qualitative in nature and focuses on Marwari women living in Siliguri city of Darjeeling district in West Bengal.

Keywords: patriarchy, family business, freedom, unfreedom, women's agency, subordination

Indian business families are predominantly patriarchal in nature. The male-centered Indian societies do not encourage the involvement of women in family-run business. The Marwaris are a migratory community from Rajasthan who have settled in different parts of India where they find potential business opportunities. The community strongly believes in investing labour in their own business and prefer not to work as salaried employees. This is solely because business gives them their identity and is a way of life. The Marwari community in India which is known for their acute materialistic orientation draws a rigid binary between participation of men and women in the workforce. While Marwari men are known for their business acumen, women live in unfreedom as they are restricted to only household chores and motherhood. Their vocation becomes domestic chores. The traditional psyche of Marwari men shaped by staunch patriarchal ethos disallows women to work outside their homes, resulting in Marwari women losing out on self-sufficient job opportunities. They are also not encouraged to take up salaried jobs. Traditionally Marwari women were not actively involved in business due to patriarchal family structure. The eldest male had to take up the responsibility of managing the family business while the women were expected to shoulder the responsibilities of their husbands by managing household chores. The societal norms also disparaged women from pursuing business careers. The emphasis has always been on marriage and family. Lack of business education further limited their ability to enter business. The Marwaris have a very materialistic orientation which is socio-culturally inherited from their native place Rajasthan. The continuation of family business requires a male heir which makes the practice of son preference

more pronounced and a perpetual practice in this community. This materialist orientation which is so strongly ingrained in this culture constrains them from changing their approach towards life and approach towards daughters and women. This business aspiration often renders daughters as unwanted as they are unable to contribute anything of substance to business (Karmakar 2022). This is a pan Indian practice which is often cynical. The north-west India (Rajasthan, Haryana, Chandigarh and certain parts of Delhi) is badly reputed for practicing several atrocities against girl child. Further, the marriage of daughters leads to drainage of a substantially large part of family saving, thereby making daughters a liability for the family. The daughters in general are socialised to be good wives, mothers and daughters-in-law. More precisely, it is considered that they have a fulfilling life when they bear son/sons and raise them as potential assets who will lead to the continuation and proliferation of family business. However, with changing times and rising levels of education and awareness, young Marwari women are showing keenness to enter in family-business or take up entrepreneurship, thereby challenging the traditional stereotypes and negotiating their space in the business world. The materialistic orientation of this community is gradually accepting the role of women in family business alongside their fathers, brothers or husbands. The prime objective of the study is therefore to understand how Marwari women are defying patriarchy, if at all, and negotiating their entrance and creating a space for them in family run business. The context of freedom and unfreedom mainly has reference to the patriarchal mindset of this community which disparages women's economic participation making them lead a life of unfreedom. Although in some cases it can be seen that women are given some freedom to participate in economic enterprises but this freedom too is structured and constrained by the male of the house.

Theoretical framework

The study draws on theoretical insights from the works of Beauvoir and Giddens. Beauvoir's *Second Sex* talks of women being treated as "other" in a patriarchal society which limits their

freedom and scope of self-realization. The social institutions, cultural myths and laws constantly reproduce factors that continue to disadvantage her position and define her as inferior. The confinement of women to traditional gendered roles within marriage and home has limited their opportunities to unleash their true potentials beyond the structured roles and are forced to live a life defined by men. Beauvoir therefore calls for a critical understanding of women's freedom which requires a shift in social attitudes and structures towards women. She argues for the necessity of women's freedom through participation in the workforce, challenging the confinement of women to marriage and domestic roles. Giddens's (1984) understanding of structure-agency dialect gives a post-structuralist interpretation of self and human behaviour. He developed the theory of structuration which acknowledges the interaction and dynamic relationship between structure and agency. According to him, structures do not themselves exist in spatial and temporal context; rather they become manifested in the social system in the form of reproduced practices. Agents operate within the norms put forward by social structure. They learn these rules and apply them consciously or unconsciously in different contexts. Giddens refers to reflexivity as self-consciousness of agents which help agents to monitor, reflect and think about their activities and structural conditions. Women's continuous subordination in society is the outcome of patriarchy which structures women's role and position. However, women are now negotiating structures that compel them to live a life of indignity. They wish to exercise their agency by making choices and taking decisions which will enable them to live a life of freedom.

Methodology

Siliguri, a city in northern West Bengal offers a potential site for trading and business opportunities due to its strategically geo-political location. The city well-known as 'chicken's neck' is a narrow stretch of land connecting India with the entire north-eastern states of India. The city also shares close international

boundaries with countries like Bhutan, Nepal and Bangladesh, offering scope of cross-borders trade and making it one of the fast-growing cities of West Bengal in terms of economy. The geo-strategical location of the city and the booming economic opportunities in trade and commerce have attracted migrants not only from neighbouring states but also from adjacent countries. The Marwaris of Siliguri are also a migrant community from Rajasthan who have migrated to this place in search of better business opportunities. The community is known for its sharp business acumen which makes them a successful business community across the country but is also recognised as a community that is extremely patriarchal and gender-biased. During the course of this qualitative study, interviews were carried out among 100 educated Marwari women in Siliguri. Out of 100, 70 women were a part of their husband's family business and the remaining 30 had their own shops and boutiques across the city. The respondents in this research were identified through snow-ball sampling. The qualitative data collected through case studies included narratives of lived experiences of the respondents and the meanings they attached to them. By applying descriptive phenomenology, the data collected through in-depth case studies were translated into text. The text was subjected to interpretation to generalize theories in the light of the existing discourses of the subject.

Socio-economic background of the informants

The Marwari families constituted in the present study belong to second and third generation migrants from Rajasthan. Out of 100 respondents, 37 Marwari women are born in Siliguri and 63 of them have settled in Siliguri after their marriage. All 100 respondents belong to business families and are self-employed. The age of the informants varies from 20 years to 45 years.

Table 1: Educational background

	Up to class XII	Graduation	Post-graduation/ Technical education	Total
Informants	30	60	10	100
Informants' spouse	7	78	15	100
Total	27	148	25	200

Source: Fieldwork

The educational background of the informants shows that males outnumber females in higher education. Boys are encouraged to complete their graduation but in case of girls, marriage continues to be prioritized over education. But there has been slight improvement in the level of education among Marwaris in recent times where informants have pursued higher or technical education. In contemporary times young boys and girls wish to pursue MBA which is directly related to business

Table: 2Family income of informants

Family income (in Rs. in thousands) per month (approx.)				Total
51-70	71-90	91-1.50	1.51+	
4	12	34	50	100

Source: Fieldwork

In the case of the informants having their own shops and boutiques, the finances are managed by their husbands. The income obtained from the business goes to family income. They do have a share of the profit but major financial expenses of the family are decided by the husbands.

Table 3: Nature of Family

Nuclear family	Joint family	Extended family	Total

39	41	20	100
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Source: Fieldwork

The Marwaris largely prefer to live in multi-generational joint families. The reason cited for this is family business which gets transferred from one generation to the next. The present generation learns business tactics from their parents and at the same time the joint family system preserves joint property which helps in family savings and that the money can be used in business. Experiential learning and community traditions such as joint family and extended family structure are the Marwari way of doing business.

Table 4: Age at marriage

Below 18 years	19-22years	23-25 years	Total
5	51	44	100

Source: Fieldwork

The preferable age of marriage of Marwari women is after completing their graduation which is within 22 years. In urban areas the age of marriage goes up to 25 years as young girls are now eager to pursue higher studies and careers. One of the positive changes among Marwaris is that they have evolved from their traditional practice of child marriage. They are aware that the urban space is not suitable for such regressive practice. Even in families where there is a tradition of early marriage, there is now a trend to wait until their daughters turn 18 years.

Table 5: Number of children

Single child	Two children	Three children and above	Total
40	55	5	100

Source: Fieldwork

The Marwaris prefer to have a two-child family with one son and one daughter. There is a strong son preference in this community due to the pressure of continuation of family business. They consider a family with one son and one daughter to be a balanced family. Couples having a single child are still in their fecundity age. Though some of the respondents having a single child claimed that they do not wish to go for a second child but accepts that they do not have the sole discretionary power in relation to family planning. Couples who have three or more children accept that they were trying for a male child which led to practice of continuous reproduction. In these cases, the couples already had two daughters. They desperately wanted a son in the family. However, not all among them were ultimately blessed with a son. Some of them presently have three daughters in the family.

The socio-economic background of the informants shows that the community is gradually adapting to the dynamics of the changing society. They, however, continue to follow their community culture closely and place high value on their community identity. Community bonding continues to be very significant among the Marwaris as they strongly uphold their cultural traditions which give them their sense of identity.

Factors leading to women's economic participation

I. Role of education in changing social dynamics

Educational qualification and professional degrees give access to cultural capital. Urban middle class Marwaris encourage proper schooling for both daughters and sons. They prefer to send their children to elite English medium schools of the cities which are looked up as a matter of status and pride in their community. Recent trends show that beside the already existing economic capital, there has been a growing emphasis on achieving cultural capital among the urban educated Marwari couples. This shows a departure from their traditional practice in their native place Rajasthan where education, especially for girls was not much encouraged. Rajasthan is characterized as “culture against females” (Miller, 1981, p.15). A look at the census data of Rajasthan reflects poor child sex ratio

and low level of literacy among females. Practice of child-marriage is very much prevalent in Rajasthan which fosters atrocities against young girls. (Times of India, July 12, 2016). Female literacy rate is 52.12 percent whereas the male literacy rate is 79.19 percent and child sex ratio (CSR) is 883 according to the 2011 census. Marwari parents prefer sending sons to school over daughters. The reluctance to educate daughters rather originates from traditional notions of modesty and the inability to perform the role of women properly and also that education might hamper a girl's marriage prospectus (Mandlebaum, 1970). The urban educated Marwaris however do not show any propensity to perpetuate such practice. They focus on proper schooling of both boys and girls. However; complexities arise when boys and girls want to pursue higher studies. Though urban Marwari parents are willing to educate their children in reputed English medium schools, they show reluctance in sending their children for higher studies. In the case of boys, Marwari's prefer to save money and invest in business. They believe that the onus of earning a livelihood and becoming rich is not always on higher educational degrees. Rather hands-on learning and practical experiences would be more beneficial for them than bookish knowledge. As it is imperative for Marwari boys to join their family business and continue the legacy, they are expected to join the family business at a young age. In the case of girls, parents prefer to save it up for their marriage. Both the present generation of girls and boys are encouraged to complete their graduation. This mainly has reference to their marriage profile. Very few Marwaris are taking up higher education which shows a recent trend of departure from their customary mentality. In contemporary times young boys and girls wish to pursue MBA for higher studies which is directly related to business and increased economic potential. Boys are eager to do so as they expect getting more dowry at the time of marriage but girls wish to take up higher education so that they can uplift their status in the community and be at par with their male counterpart and by being financially independent, they hope to ease out their parents from paying huge dowry at the time of their marriage. Education empowers modern women and helps them to

make their way in economic enterprises. Contemporary Marwari women are better educated than their mothers and mother-in-law. They are equipped with knowledge and skills to enter into business or take up entrepreneurship and achieve financial independence. The following narratives give a glimpse of changing perception among young Marwari women regarding attainment of higher studies:

Sonia (23 years) is presently studying MBA. She completed her graduation in commerce from a college in Kolkata and is pursuing MBA from Symbiosis, Pune. Sonia has always dreamt of becoming a career woman and being financially independent. She did not wish to be a salaried employee in any company but hoped to have her own business start-up. Sonia reckons of convincing her father by assuring him that her MBA experience will help to understand the contemporary dimensions of business both nationally and internationally. Her father, who is a hardware merchant, agreed to educate his daughter well before getting her married. Her younger brother however did not wish to pursue any higher studies rather preferred to join his father's business right after completing his graduation. Although Sonia's mother resented initially but as she had already taken her father's approval, her mother couldn't oppose much. Sonia expressed her happiness in the fact that her father allowed her to pursue higher studies and supported her decision to become financially independent, a practice that is seldom in her culture.

Neha (26 years) dreamt of becoming a Chartered Accountant (CA) just like her brother and opening a firm for her. She started preparing right after completing her graduation. Her parents initially did not object to her aspirations. But kin members soon started getting marriage proposals for her. Neha was not at all ready to get married before becoming self-dependent. However, she had to give up her aspirations before parental pressure. She got married

to a hotelier who owns a chain of hotels in Delhi. Neha mentions that she requested her husband to allow her to prepare for CA as she is well educated and does not want to live a life of a housewife. She expressed her desire to open her own firm once she becomes a CA. Her husband agreed to it on the condition that once they decide to plan their family she should completely focus on the upbringing of their child/children. Neha accepted his condition as she understands that once she becomes a mother her priorities will change but until then she is happy that she is at least getting a chance to fulfil her dreams.

Attainment of higher educational degree is a medium of being financially independent. Marwaris prefer to be self-employed. Working for someone else as salaried employees is perceived as a disgrace in their community. Marwari youths have convinced their parents to allow them to pursue higher studies like MBA as it would help them to enhance their business skills and knowledge and contribute to personal and professional growth. Financial knowledge could be helpful for women to identify and comprehend financial implications associated with business enabling them to contribute diverse perspectives. Education marks a generational shift in purpose and influence. Many young Marwari girls expressed their desire to pursue higher studies and come up with their own ventures. A strong cultural emphasis on business acumen has also been passed down through generations in Marwari families. Growing educational opportunities, desire for financial independence and shift towards a modern family structure encourages Marwari women to take up entrepreneurship or business within the community. The informants expressed their desire to pursue business ventures like their male counterparts and leverage their inherent skills and knowledge. However, such initiatives are not possible without the support of their fathers or husbands. It is seen that in present times Marwari men are also welcoming such changes and investing in these new ventures they believe that as they are investing for their family members the profit will come back in the family. The educated Marwari youths believe

in opening their own business or join their family business rather taking up any company placement. They have inclination for business from a very young age as they practice sitting in their fathers' shop from teenage. Marwari men now are allowing the women of the house to participate in family business or take up new entrepreneurial ventures provided that their participation do not impede the domestic affairs.

II. The Changing Marwari Family Structure

Traditionally the Marwaris believed in living in intergenerational joint families in order to avoid split in family business. But being a migratory community, they prefer settling in places that offer good business potential. The migration has resulted in split in joint-families as youths prefer to settle in cosmopolitan cities. The breaking up of the joint-family system did not lead to internal disputes impairing the family business. Rather in most cases it led to expansion of family business in different cities across the country. The present generation prefers this practice of moving to new cities so that they can independently start or expand business. This allows young couples the freedom to exercise their agency and give them the autonomy to decide the well-being of their family without any kind of family or kin intervention. Usually Marwari joint-families are very patriarchal and thereby conservative in nature which does not allow their mothers, daughters and wives to work outside their home. But it has become convenient for Marwari women in urban nuclear families to take up a career and support their husbands financially. There has also been a change in the reproductive behaviour of urban young couples. The fertility trend among Marwari is usually high. There is less preference for a single child in Marwari families. Marwari couples have a strong son preference which results in high fertility among them. They require a male heir for continuation and expansion of family business. A family business is run with the prime objective of building as well as sustaining successful business in order to create cash and preserve it for coming generations (Khosla & Gupta, 2017). Marwaris therefore depend

on family manpower for executing and taking care of business. A girl child is not always unwanted but preference for a boy child is more acute. If the first child is a boy, they are more relaxed in case of the second child. But if there are two daughters there is a practice of continuous reproduction among the traditional Marwaris until having a male heir in the family. This made the lives of women miserable as their only vocation was to bear a male lineage and take care of domestic affairs. They lacked freedom in taking any decision regarding family planning.

Another factor that led to high fertility among the Marwaris was the early age of marriage. Marwari parents prefer to get their children, both girls and boys, married at a young age. The reason being that early marriage will lead to early entrance in family life which would lead to stable running of family business without any unnecessary distraction. The notion of '*ghar-grihasti*' (household) is a predominant part of Marwari culture. Once a girl gets married and goes to her husband's house, she is not allowed to take up a job as it is regarded as demeaning to the husband's family. These factors served as major impediments for Marwari women to enter the work space. The young educated Marwari couples are however showing a departure from such attitudes. The practice of continuous reproduction until having a male child is not at all encouraged by present age couples. They prefer to have a two-child family even if it is two daughters. They prefer to have a male child but have accepted daughters in the family. Though having only daughters in the family is very rare in Marwari business families especially in the earlier generations, the present age generation has taken initiative of this practice. Moreover, the exorbitant cost of living in urban space and the desire to live a hedonistic life has urged couples to rationalise the size of the family. This trend has given a certain amount of liberty to the women to come out of the shackles of domestic activities and give some time to the family business or take up entrepreneurship. Marwari women have very limited scope of pursuing a professional career. If they had any professional aspirations, it could be done as avocation distinctly away from the main family business. The practice of early marriage in Marwari

community leads to early entry of Marwari girls into household life. They do not have the freedom to try out their luck in job or career. After marriage women are not encouraged to continue their jobs or take up any new one. The emphasis has always been on becoming caring daughters-in-law, dutiful wives and caring mothers and living life as home-makers. This is how Marwari women narrate their stories:

Ishita (29 years) had been consistently good in her academics and wished to become a career woman after completion of her graduation. She expressed her desire to pursue MBA after her graduation but her parents were reluctant to spend a huge amount for her higher studies. They rather wanted to save the money for her marriage. Ishita mentions that she had decided to open up a bakery and hand-made chocolate shop as her parents were not supportive of her decision of pursuing higher studies. She was unwilling to get married until becoming financially independent as she strongly feels that every girl should be financially self-dependent. Her father accepted to invest in her shop. She got married at the age of 24 and after her marriage, her husband who is a real-estate dealer, agreed to continue the business. Though it is her husband who has a major say in matters of her business she has no qualms about it. She accepts that all the financial decisions and matters of investment are taken by her husband but is happy with the fact that she is not living her life only as a home-maker.

Nidhi (38 years) mentions that while growing up she was always keen to join her father's business like her elder brother. But due to early marriage she did not get the chance to fulfil her desire. After 15 years of her marriage, she expressed her desire to her husband to open a small business of making pickles. She convinced her husbands that since both her sons are now grown up, she could devote time to her passion. Her husband agreed to help her to start her new

shop. Though it is her husband who maintains all the accounts of the shops and takes care of all the finances, Nidhi expresses her joy that she is at least getting an opportunity free herself from the confinement of household chores and take up to her dream of having a shop.

Megha (34 years) mentions that she was always inclined to do something productive. She runs a garment shop along with her husband. She had completed her B. Com and also took training courses for account management. Her father owns a hardware shop and prior to her marriage she used to help him in managing accounts of the shop. She had strong desire to pursue MBA and have a career but never expressed it to her parents as she was aware that pursuing MBA would require a lot of money and her parents will not agree to it. Megha got married at the age of 25 and became a mother in the following year. Her husband who owns a garment shop has recently ventured into the transportation business. Since he became busy with his new project, he was facing little difficulty in managing both which was affecting their married life. Megha wished to offer a helping hand to her husband convincing him that she will first take care of their child and household and only in her spare time she would visit the shop. Initially her husband and in-laws resented. The in-laws were not in favour of sending their daughter-n-law to sit in the shop and interact with strangers. Megha wanted a little respite from her in-laws and household work. She managed to convince her husband to allow her to go to shop. She was initially looking after accounts but now she manages every single detail of the shop. This gives her a bit of scope to fulfil her desire of being a career woman and partial satisfaction, if not completely. She mentions that her husband takes all the major business decisions. She adds that since their community is very patriarchal, women's opinion regarding business matters is not taken in a positive note.

Divya and Nita expressed their views differently in this matter

Divya (30 years) owns a boutique in Siliguri. She had completed her fashion designing course from Delhi. She had to get married within a year after completing her course and within two years of her marriage she was blessed with a son. She opened her boutique with the help of her husband once her son started going to school. Divya states that her husband is very supportive of her career. She has the freedom to take all the decisions regarding her boutique except managing finance. Her husband is a hardware merchant and remains busy with his stores. Divya mentions that she really faced challenges with her mother-in-law who did not support her decision to come up with a boutique at all. Her mother-in-law despised her decision of coming up with her own boutique, often taunting her that they do not wish to live on daughter-in-law's income. Divya adds that although they have a maid and cook in the house, her in-laws expect her to cook for them and serve them once she comes back from the boutique. She also has to take care of her son's homework after the tuition teacher leaves. Her in-laws want her to fulfil her duties towards family first and then career.

Nita (34 years) is a make-up artist and owns two salons in the city. Her husband owns two pharmaceutical shops. Nita started her career as a make-up artist. Eventually when she got popular and was making good money, she asked her husband to help her open a salon. Nita had invested most of her savings in opening her salons. She mentions that since she had been earning a good amount of profit her husband helped her in every possible way. She adds her husband also took care of their children back home when she became very busy with her salon. However, she could sense discontentment from her mother-in-law who often passes sarcastic comments of not being a good housewife and mother. Nita mentions that she doesn't pay much attention

to such sarcasm as she strongly feels that it is not only to earn money but fight for identity and respect.

The narratives of the respondents reveal how Marwari women are making their way in economic activities while also maintaining their household. They are constantly negotiating with their cultural practices to create an identity for themselves.

Discussion

Getting into family business or taking up entrepreneurship are means of freedom for Marwari women from the rigid and stereotypical roles of women of their community. Though they get freedom from their daily house chores they are still negotiating their identity and space in family-run business and entrepreneurship. Women are constantly subjected to the discretion of the patriarch of the house, who can either be the eldest male members of the family or their husbands to do anything new to avoid cultural prejudices. Many respondents implied in their tone that, although they are allowed to participate in the family-business, they always remain under the discretion of the men of the house. The Marwari community is replete with staunch patriarchal ethos that have always worked against women's freedom. The patriarch or the head of the family overwhelmingly dominates the decision-making process in matters of household and business. The women of the house consistently lag behind men in terms of discretionary power and resources. They are groomed to prioritise family life.

The propensity for early marriage among Marwaris reflects the community's preference to see the younger generation 'settled' in life at a very young age. The idea is that once children get married, they are expected to perform their duties in both work and family which will in turn help in flourishing of family business. In Marwari culture, both men and women of the family are assigned specific gender roles. They believe that a well-balanced household contributes to prosperity in business. The persistent belief among Marwaris is that once a boy joins business, he becomes independent but once a girl gets married, she is subjected to discretion of her in-laws. She is asked to devote more time in doing or supervising

household chores and during her leisure time she may assist her husband in his work. This makes way for gradual entry of Marwari women into business if she has acceptable and adequate educational qualifications. While Marwari women continue to face cultural limitations, they are gaining some degree of liberty in certain aspects. Although they do not have the freedom to pursue career or take up jobs after marriage, they are allowed to join their husbands' business which gives them an opportunity to participate in economic activities. In situations where women have their own shops, boutiques, or other economic enterprises, financial decision is not always taken autonomously by women. It is the husband or father who takes major financial decisions even if the owner is a female. Women too allow this practice as they are conditioned to believe that male have better financial acumen and are more aware of the practical world.

The hegemonic patriarchal institutions and societal norms structure men and women with socially prescribed gendered roles. Women's agency continues to be confined within this structure thereby reinforcing patriarchy. The material base of patriarchy is men's control over women's labour power and that control is maintained by restricting women's access to economic resources and women's sexuality (Hartmann 1981). Beauvoir (1953) claims that women are complicit in their own un freedom. Women do not reject their position as other and accept and embrace this position where her freedom is effectively suppressed (Kruks, 1987, p.115). Giddens's (2006) Structuration theory highlights that though individuals are shaped by social structures, cultural norms and values, they too are capable of shaping that structure through their agency. Agency gives individual power to act independently despite socio-structural constraints. He talks of 'duality of structure' which means that while social structures can guide and constrain individual behaviour, they too are the outcome of individuals' actions. The Marwari community is completely driven by materialistic orientation. The focus on expansion and continuation of business is ingrained in their cultural tradition and

this orientation constrains them from changing their approach towards life and women. There is a clear division of labour wherein men of the family are assigned the task of production and women of the family are assigned the task of reproduction. This relegates Marwari women to a subordinate position. The Marwari family thus is a typical site for the reproduction of patriarchy where sons and daughters are socialised into conventional patriarchal values. Masculinity and femininity are thereby socially constructed at both the community and family level. In a life defined by patriarchy, Marwari women find it very difficult to challenge their community. They are aware that any deviation from their conventional values and practices can lead to stigmatisation for the family and community. However, educated urban Marwari women are gaining courage to deviate, though slightly, from conventional patriarchal practices. They increasingly recognise the need to align themselves with the contemporary world where women are gradually making entry in the field of economy. The present generation of Marwaris do not want to be labelled as orthodox and regressive. They are aware of the need to adapt to socio-cultural changes. The status of women plays a pivotal role in determining whether a community can be judged 'modern'. The gradual entry of Marwari women in family run business and entrepreneurship clearly shows that they have begun to challenge their conventional community perception of women as solely housewives and caregivers. Marwari women are negotiating the structural constraints that have historically limited their agency.

In India, matters of succession and inheritance of family-owned business have traditionally concerned only male members of the family. With the growing prevalence of small size-families, the number of sons in joint families capable of running the business has decreased. This change has paved the way for the gradual entry of women in family business. But as women are regarded as the "second sex"; they cannot exercise absolute freedom to emancipate themselves from the stranglehold of patriarchal social norms and structures and to create an autonomous social space for themselves. In any social situation, women have to confront bigger and harsher

challenges compared to their male counterparts who constitute the privileged “first sex”. Marwari girls have limited career options. Although a small number of women are beginning to gather courage to deviate from traditionally imposed cultural practices, the majority still give up their career aspirations for the sake of maintaining their family integrity and cultural ethics of the community. Convincing their family to allow them to pursue a career continues to be one of the most challenging tasks for women. Individual women’s experience of patriarchy is conditioned by several social, economic and cultural factors. Although all women are inevitably affected by patriarchy, some face more oppression than the others. In some cultural contexts in India, women are denied the access to the means of financial independence, making marriage appear as a necessity. Married women are confined within household chores and denied freedom to engage in any kind of financial matters. Beauvoir claims that gendered structure of power limits women’s freedom. The inability to exercise one’s freedom even when it formally exists becomes a form of oppression. This is clearly reflected in the case of Marwari women who despite their employment are not free from their domestic responsibilities.

Conclusion

With changing times, modern educated young girls and women are challenging the constructed notion of femininity designed by patriarchy. Women are now exercising their agency to challenge the patriarchal ordeal in order to free themselves from their subordinate and secondary position. But the social structure constructed by patriarchal norms, have assigned subordinate position to women. Even though women are excelling in many fields in contemporary world by virtue of their merit, the secondary status conferred by patriarchal institutions and social relations creates obstacles to their advancement in society. Kate Millet’s theory of subordination argues that women are a dependent sex class under patriarchal domination (Millet 1977). Through socialisation Women have internalised the cultural norms which predispose them to accept their subordinate position. Beauvoir’s

The Second Sex discusses the ways in which women continue to remain unfree. Societal expectations and structures limit their freedom and this characterization still has contemporary resonance. The distinction between power and freedom is fundamental to Beauvoir's account of patriarchal oppression (Langley, 2024). Beauvoir explains the materialistic account of women's unfreedom in terms of their unequal position in society and dependence on men in the notion of women as 'other'. Women are unfree because they are contrived as the other and this existential otherness leads to their material and social unfreedom. Post-structuralist scholars like Butler (1990) mentions that gender identity is constructed and regulated by the power of norms that constrains the performances of gender. There is therefore a necessity to challenge dominant gender norms by exposing the contingent acts that produce the appearance of gender identity as natural. The idea is that if individuals do not depart from the normative structure of society, no social change will occur. It is therefore necessary for women to resist the constructed gender roles which deny their freedom and to look for alternatives that secure their agency.

The gradual entry of Marwari women in family-business or entrepreneurship is to seek freedom from confinement of domestic chores. The family firm becomes the stepping stone for the educated young women who aspire to venture into business or entrepreneurship. Though women have been accepted in family-business they continue to remain restricted and unfree in matters of discretionary powers. Women continue to face social coercion in pursuing their dreams. It is difficult for them to "escape the traditional feminine world" prescribed by patriarchy as it conditions and coerces the means by which women manifest their freedom. Women's freedom and unfreedom is framed in accordance to patriarchal expectations of femininity. Marwari women are negotiating this dialectical relationship between domination and subordination in defining their material position in everyday life. They continue to navigate role conflicts to make way into business and entrepreneurship, resisting being confined solely

to the role of a family caregiver. They are constantly struggling to exercise their agency within the constraints.

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**Exploring Cultural Syncretism at Theyyottuchira Sufi Maqam
and its Influence on the Local Community**

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Shilujas M. **

Abstract

This paper explores the concept of cultural syncretism within the context of the Theyyottuchira Sufi Maqam, located in Kerala, India. The study delves into how the Maqam serves as a unifying force, transcending religious and caste boundaries, and strengthening a harmonious community where diverse religious practices coexist. Through interviews and keen observations, the paper highlights how the community embraces inclusivity and human values over religious distinctions, promoting unity and social cohesion. The analysis reveals that the Maqam's ideological framework and practices, such as communal participation in Annadanam and regional festivals like Onam and Pooram, play a pivotal role in creating cultural integration. Additionally, the Maqam's involvement in social welfare activities further reinforces the ethos of cultural syncretism. The paper concludes by emphasizing the profound impact of the Maqam on the community's

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identity, offering insights into the ways cultural syncretism can contribute to building stronger and more inclusive societies.

Keywords: cultural syncretism, Sufi *Maqam*, inclusivity, religious harmony, social cohesion

Cultural syncretism refers the blending of diverse cultural and religious practices to form new expressions, which is a critical phenomenon in contemporary societies (Stewart, 1999). As globalization facilitates unprecedented cultural exchange, understanding syncretism has become essential for appreciating the richness and complexity of human societies. This process not only shapes individual identities but also influences collective worldviews, societal norms, and modes of interaction. More importantly, cultural syncretism plays a vital role in fostering social cohesion and inter group understanding, particularly in multicultural societies like India.

India's rich tapestry of religious and cultural diversity provides fertile ground for examining the mechanisms of cultural syncretism. Within this context, Theyyottuchira, a village known for its religious harmony, offers a remarkable case study. Home to the Theyyottuchira Sufi *Maqam*¹, where Kammu Sufi (Kamaludin Sufi) rests, this sacred site exemplifies inclusivity by welcoming individuals of all castes and religions. The traditions and practices surrounding the *Maqam* make Theyyottuchira a beacon of cultural harmony and mutual respect (Abdurahman, 2018).

The sociological significance of this study lies in its potential to illuminate how cultural syncretism fosters inclusivity and unity in diverse communities. By exploring the dynamics of cultural exchange at Theyyottuchira Sufi *Maqam*, this article aims to uncover the processes through which syncretism shapes community dynamics and promotes intergroup harmony. Such an understanding is not only academically valuable but also crucial for addressing challenges of social cohesion in contemporary multicultural societies.

Literature Review

Cultural syncretism, the blending of distinct cultural and religious practices, fosters the creation of new customs, ideas, and philosophies. Lambropoulos (1999) emphasizes that it emerges within specific socio-historical frameworks, while Muscato highlights its role in forming innovative cultural expressions. This phenomenon holds particular importance in understanding interfaith interactions and social cohesion in multicultural societies, such as India.

Sufism², a mystical facet of Islamic culture, significantly contributes to cultural syncretism through its philosophy, religious orders, and popular piety. Across Africa and Asia, Sufism has influenced poetry, women's religious participation, and religious conversions (Elias, 2007). In India, Sufism exhibits parallels to Turkish traditions, shaped by Central Asian influences and Persian literary dominance. Sufi orders played a crucial role in Indian history, promoting intercession and the veneration of saints, particularly in regions like Malabar (Razak, 2007).

Theyyottuchira, located in the culturally rich Valluvanadu region of Kerala, exemplifies cultural syncretism through the Theyyottuchira Sufi *Maqam*. Established by Kamaludin Sufi, also known as Kammu Sufi, the *Maqam* has become a spiritual hub transcending caste and religious boundaries. Kammu Sufi's contributions to the region's religious and social harmony reflect the broader dynamics of cultural syncretism in Malabar. Historical records document the arrival of Sufi saints, such as Hadramis and Jifris, who integrated with local Mappila communities, fostering trade, education, and spirituality (Abdurahman, 2018). An unpublished PhD thesis on Life of Sufis in Kerala (Shilujas 2022) discussed about the syncretic traits existing among different *Tariqats* and individual Sufis were placed as a response to the growing Islamic tendencies of religious rigidity and revivalist influences that have been recently identified as strengthening among different Muslim sectarian organisations in Kerala and

elsewhere. The counter developments emerge in any system of faith when it becomes rigid.

Sociological studies of religion offer valuable insights into the interplay between religion and society. They reveal how religious practices, beliefs, and institutions shape social norms, values, and behaviours (Roof, 1999). The Theyyottuchira Sufi *Maqam* exemplifies these dynamics, illustrating how Sufi traditions foster inclusivity and interfaith harmony in a multicultural context. Here we can apply the method of Clifford Geertz “thick description” which shows how symbols carry layered meanings, shaping social values like unity, harmony and pluralism and the idea that culture is a system of symbols (Geertz, 1973). In this study *Maqam* is not just a physical shrine but functioning as a symbolic space where divine, communal and cultural meanings intersect. The *Maqam* becomes a shared cultural text where people interpret it as a site of blessings, memory of Sufi saints and continuity of tradition.

Objectives

1. To analyse the syncretic ideology existing among the community around Theyyottuchira Sufi *Maqam*.
2. To analyse the syncretic practices existing among the community around Theyyottuchira Sufi *Maqam*.
3. To analyse the social impact of cultural syncretism within the community.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore cultural syncretism at Theyyottuchira Sufi *Maqam*, using an exploratory design. The exploratory nature of the research is suited to investigating relatively unstudied topics, allowing for in-depth understanding and hypothesis generation. The study focuses on exploring how cultural syncretism is ideologically and practically expressed within the community surrounding the *Maqam* and its influence on social cohesion.

The research was conducted at Theyyottuchira Sufi *Maqam*, located in the village of Theyyottuchira in Kerala, known for its religious and cultural harmony. The study included a sample of 10 individuals from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, ages, and genders, selected through simple random sampling to ensure fairness and a balanced representation. Interviews and participant observation formed the primary data collection methods, providing both qualitative depth and contextual insights into community practices, rituals, and perceptions.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants to explore their experiences and views on cultural syncretism, while participant and non-participant observation allowed the researcher to immerse in the daily activities of the community. The study used interview guides to maintain consistency across interviews and field notes to capture relevant observations during the data collection process. Limitations included a small sample size, time constraints, and the potential influence of social desirability bias on participant responses.

Experiences from the Field

Illustration 1

Pathumma, 65 years old, enjoys her life. She is *Ek Sunni*³ a follower of the Muslim League. She has primary education. She is married, and that connects her more with Kammu Sufi Maqam. Her father was a well-informed person. Father and mother had good faith in maqam. It was from them that Pathumma came to know about Theyyottuchira for the first time. Later, after the wedding, she learned more about maqam from my mother-in-law and husband.

She says that "I am a Muslim by religion. But I have a tradition of seeing everyone as equal. That's what gets used to and what follows. Religion is two, but blood is one. I don't consider religion in my relationships." From this, Pathumma's religious and cultural integration are clear. "Theyyotyuchira is an inclusive maqam. It is a very good practice and should be continued. Then and now, everyone is the same, regardless of caste. Although not in

religious matters, culturally they participate in ceremonies like *Pooram*⁴ and *Onam*⁵. Every *Onam*, they go to their homes and eat *sadya*⁶.

She stated that by the time they come to Theyyottuchira, everyone's faith becomes one; there are not two. No one will stop anyone there. Other religions also have faith in Theyyottuchira. They will put the money in the box and light the sandalwood candle on the head of the *kammupapa*⁷ (*kammu Sufi*). They have access up there. No one should stop them. *Papa* doesn't like that. Everyone is the same as *kammu Papa*. It also enriches social relationships.

Pathumma describes that girls and sick people get help from *maqam*. Religion is not considered in any of this. I got help during my daughter's marriage, and *maqam* does not discriminate between Hindus and Muslims. *Kammu Papa* (*Kammu Sufi*) also had no such difference. That is why so many people come there. *Pathumma* concludes that *Papa's* annual vow is something everyone participates in. Rice, chicken, and goats will be brought there. Everyone will buy that food from a line. The remaining rice and other items will be auctioned. All castes can participate in that auction too. There is neither male nor female in Theyyottuchira. Everyone can come there. The influence of *maqam* in creating cultural harmony in society is also evident from *Pathumma's* words.

Illustration 2

Susheela, 56 years old, is talkative and has a relationship with the majority of the community. She is Hindu, a follower of communism, and *SSLC*⁸-educated. She works as a part of *Deesheya Grameena Thozhilurapp Padhath*⁹. *Susheela* initially learned about *kammu Sufi maqam* from her parents; they were not educated and economically backward.

She says, "I am a person of the *cheruman*¹⁰ caste in the Hindu religion. Culturally, I include everyone in the community.". This highlights *Susheela's* ideology of religious harmony. In Theyyottuchira, there is no difference between Hindus and

Muslims. We (the family) participate in the functions there. Also participates in Hindu rituals. Ours is a journey together, without distinction." *Onam, Pooram, and Annadanam*¹¹ are events that everyone participates in in the community. Theyyottuchira Sufi *Maqam* is a place of faith for everyone, whether Hindu or Muslim. Being a Muslim sect and following such rituals, Hinduism is not seen as different. It creates unity in society."

She describes that vows and food giving at the maqam are attended by all, irrespective of caste. Although we are of two religions, we attend every function there. During the programmes there, money is put in the box as an offering. It's not because there are no temples here, but because of the belief in the goddess. She says, "It's a maqam of truth. It's a glorious place. Gods are all one; only they live according to religion."

She shared her experiences. "My daughter has two boys, and when she got pregnant for the third time, I vowed it would be a boy. A vow was made to cover that child with *yaram*¹². It was a boy." Vows are made whenever there is grief in the family. I have been at least 40 times to *Annadanna* in Theyyottuchira. Everyone is the same there.

Illustration 3

Subaitha, 56 years old, is an anganvadi worker and a well-known person in the community. She is an *AP Sunni*¹³ with an SSLC education and a CPM follower. She initially heard about Sufi maqam from her parents; they believed in maqam with much experience. After marriage, 37 years ago, she acquired more knowledge and experience with Theyyottuchira Sufi Maqam. Her husband's house is near Maqam, which helped her understand more about Maqam.

Subaitha stated that "I have a culture that is inclusive of all castes and religions, although Muslims are preferred." The tradition in Theyyottuchira is very good. It embraces all and is the maqam of truth in which all have faith. The belief in that maqam includes Hindus as well. Kammu Sufi was a person who saw Hindus and

Muslims alike. All this is very good. Everyone, including Hindus, will come to the mosque, pray, and put money in the box.

Annadana its main events. Auctioning off rice and other essentials, financial assistance for the wedding of poor girls and the sick—all these, maqam are done in the community regardless of religion. Shubaitha says that "*Onam, Annadanam, and Pooram* are all seen as celebrations of religious harmony. He participates in all that. The maqam creates unity and cooperation in society. No one is excluded from the maqam. The religious friendship in the maqam is not limited there only and comes between us as well." The effect of maqam on harmony is evident from this.

She shared her experience that "everyone will participate in the vow. People of different castes will come to give food. Everyone has faith there. Everyone is standing in a line. No one is special there. Only goat and chicken are included in the diet to feed everyone. There is no caste problem in Maqam. My Hindu sister and I used to come and go to buy food together. Other religious people also come to the maqam on other days. There is no difference between Hindus and Muslims." This highlights Subaitha's support for cultural harmony.

Illustration 4

Suresh Kumar, 35 years old, lived near Theyyottuchira Sufi Maqam. He is a carpenter, SSLC-educated, and a communist follower. His parents were the followers of Theyyottuchira Sufi Maqam's harmonious culture. At a very young age, he learned about maqam from his parents, and he also followed maqam's culture of togetherness.

Suresh Kumar says, "I am a Hindu, but one who sees all as human beings. My culture is inclusive of all human beings. Theyyottuchira sees everyone as equal. That is a very good thing. Like *Puram* and *Onam*, I go to Theyyottuchira for vows and food offerings. Money is kept in the box to fulfil the needs. There is a belief. It also creates unity in society. From these words, Suresh Kumar's positive attitude towards cultural unity and the influence

of maqam on it is clear. Therefore, i spoke to the Maqam authorities and produced the documents. Through this, *Pujari*¹⁴ got financial help. Such activities create a sense of help and cooperation among the people. That is why we all help a girl, regardless of her religion, when she gets married. From this, it is clear how the Theyyottuchira Sufi maqam creates religious harmony and cultural harmony in the community. He recounts his experiences. There is another story I heard related to the maqam, and it goes like this: "The place where the maqam stands now used to belong to a *Namboothiri*¹⁵. But later, seeing the honesty and good nature of Kammu Papa (Kammu Sufi), *Namboothiri* gave that land to *Papa*." This story also illustrates the association of maqam with other cultures since ancient times. He says, "Maqam belongs to everyone. There is no caste in it."

He also shared his experience with *Nercha*. "I am a person who goes to *Nercha* every year. People of all castes and religions are there. There is no difference between Hindus and Muslims. Everyone is equal there. "Sureshkumar's words highlight the importance of cultural integrity and how Theyyottuchira Maqam cultivates it.

Illustration 5

Sabira, a 40-year-old homemaker who has lived near Theyyottuchira Sufi Maqam for 25 years, is an active member of the local community. She is a Muslim, a Sunni, and supports the Muslim League, though she is not actively participating. Sabira got married before the age of 25 and relocated to live near Theyyottuchira Sufi Maqam. Her husband and family-in-law are deeply connected to the maqam, following a syncretic culture. This exposure led Sabira to embrace the syncretic culture of the maqam. According to Sabira, there exists cooperation and unity among society members, irrespective of their religion and age. She emphasises that everyone values their religion, but culturally, she believes in the path of inclusive unity. Sabira recognises every individual as a human being, regardless of their religion. While not actively participating in religious matters, she joins and mentally accepts events of other religions, such as Onam and Christmas,

considering it essential for societal harmony. Sabira views the cultural syncretism at Theyyottuchira Sufi Maqam positively. People from various religions and backgrounds can come, pray, and find spiritual solace at the maqam, encouraged by the Sufi who rests there. The distribution of food, without beef, exemplifies this inclusivity. Sabira doesn't consider religion in public events or fundraising in the area during *Pooram*, *Onam*, or *Milad*. She notes that Islam teaches living with love and harmony without criticising other religions, a tradition followed and promoted by Theyyottuchira Sufi Maqam. Cultural syncretism, according to Sabira, is the message put forward by the maqam.

Sabira shares her experience of standing in a food queue at the maqam, observing Hindus, Christians, and people from different castes standing together. She explains that the maqam welcomes everyone equally, influencing how they treat others in their surroundings. This, in turn, fosters mental togetherness and unity in society. The community actively pursues social friendship in the maqam, creating warmer relations and increased cooperation.

Illustration 6

Alavi, a 49-year-old Kooli worker, has been working on programmes held by Theyyottuchira Sufi Maqam for many years. He is an *Ek Sunni* and a follower of the Congress Party, but not an active member. He has only a 4th-level education. His parents were also not well educated. They are not doing well economically. At a very young age, Alavi learnt about the maqam from his father and grandmother. Alavi has a close connection with Theyyottuchira Maqam. All religious castes come there. Coconuts, areca nuts, fruits, rice, chickens, and goats are all vowed to fulfil their wishes. He shares that Theyyottuchira is the true maqam. There is no difference between Hindus and Muslims. Maqam is proud of this tradition. All religious castes come there. Coconuts, areca nuts, fruits, rice, chickens, and goats are all vowed to fulfil their wishes. There is an annadhanam every year. People of all religions participate in it. No beef is added to it for everyone to eat. I have such experiences; I am a person who has been taking vows since

the age of 5. I go with my friends. Unni, Chami, Mani, Aziz, and Musa were all there. Later, I also go to make food, and so on. There are also many Hindu brothers there. There will be a celebration on that day. It is also clear from this experience that the Kammu Sufi maqam brings cultural integration into people's activities.

Auctioning off rice and other things and helping poor girls get married are activities done by Maqam regardless of religion. I think this is a good thing. We want everything. Everyone should participate in everything, irrespective of caste and creed. There are no Hindus or Muslims in the Kammu Sufi Maqam. Everyone can come there. Many people have entrusted money to me to pay in maqam. Grandmother, Gopuchettan, Shiva, and Appukuttan will all be included in it. Kammu Sufi maqam is a centre of religious harmony. It is enough to be human there. It is the same today. There is no one within 2 km who does not come there. The role of Kammu Sufi Maqam in fostering cultural harmony among communities is very clear in Alavi's words.

Illustration 7

Shafafa, a 23-year-old young and active woman, lives near Theyyotuchira Sufi Maqam. She is a housewife, married five years ago, and is now the mother of two children. She is Muslim, a Sunni, and studied up to +2 in school at the 5th-grade religious level. She is a UDF follower. Shafafa learnt about Theyyottuchira Maqam from her parents at a very early age. They gained secondary-level education. And her parents had very strong beliefs about Theyyottuchira Sufi maqam, and later she heard lots of stories and histories even from her husband's home.

According to Shafafa, I am a Muslim, but my culture includes all human beings, not just Muslims. I am a person who gives importance to man and humanity. Theyyoottuchira Sufi Maqam also upholds these concepts. Everyone can come in there and work well; it's such a good institution. I want it to stay that way. In these words, it is very clear that she gives more importance to cultural integrity. In Theyyottuchira maqam, there are no Hindus or Muslims; all are equal. People of other religions and locals all come

there and make offerings of money, etc., to fulfil their needs. Everyone has faith there. It is a place where truth prevails. Maqam has a tradition of inclusiveness. It is beneficial for everyone. Maqam sets an ideal for the community by involving everyone in food donation and rice distribution. *Annadanam* is something that has been going on in Maqam since ancient times. People, irrespective of caste and religion, come from far and wide to participate in the ceremony. As a result of this cooperative spirit, Maqam is very famous. A helping hand for the poor. Such a maqam is an asset and good for the community. I attend events at Maqam. Similarly, Onam and Puram also. Maqam fosters a sense of cooperation among people. Religious harmony is the value that Maqam puts forward. It is also an acknowledgement to say that it comes from Theyyottuchira. It is clear from these words that she is proud and happy about Maqam's heritage.

Then Shafafa detailed her experience. "From the age of 5, he goes for vows and food donations. Buying food in rows. Even when I went last year, I met people of many castes and religions. They were fed like me. There is no caste-religion discrimination." In this word, it is uncovered that her integrated perspective and nature are an impact or influence of Theyyottuchira Sufi Maqam.

Illustration 8

Neeshma, 28 years old, is a schoolteacher in a primary school near Theyyottuchira Sufi Maqam. She graduated in economics, is not married, and has lived near Theyyottuchira Sufi Maqam for 28 years. She learnt about Theyyottuchira Sufi Maqam from her parents. Later, I understood more from various life situations and people. She says, "I am a person who accepts all religions. Everyone is treated equally in Theyyottuchira. We are free to go there for any need. I have good faith there. I take vows to clear the exam." *Pooram, Nercha, and Onam* are all festivals of the community where everyone gathers. Everyone has the belief that anything can be achieved in Theyyottuchira. The vow, salat, and dhikr are all events in the maqam. *Nercha* is an inclusive

programme. This highlights Neeshma's inclusive and harmonious ideology.

Neeshma says that the vow, salat, and dhikr are all events in the maqam. Nerecha is an inclusive programme. Rice, onions, oils, lamps, and sandalwood are also contributed to the vow. "The maqam creates a sense of cooperation in the community as a whole," she says, "and that's why someone who comes home does not look to his religion to help." There are no Hindu-Muslim differences in my relationships. The cultural integration in Neeshma's actions is evident from these words.

Neeshma describes her various experiences with maqam: "We go to Theyyottuchira and cover the *yaram* before our children turn one year old. Vows are also taken to clear exams like lower secondary scholarship (LSS). All that happens. Another experience with maqam is this: I have been a vow-goer for the past twenty years. I went last year too, and it rained a lot that day. Even then, food was given to everyone, and no one made it with bare hands. There will be people of all castes and religions; no one is different there. I used to go to Maqam many times. Every time the school bus reaches there, prayers are offered, as is the temple. Neeshma's words indicate that the Theyyottuchira practices in the Theyyottuchira Maqam influence community practices and foster cultural harmony.

Illustration 9

Ravi, a 58-year-old Kooli worker, only has primary education. He is a Hindu and a follower of communism. His parents were illiterate; they were following the harmonious heritage of Theyyottuchira Sufi maqam, and Ravi also knew about maqam from his parents. He says that "I am a Hindu believer, heard about Maqam from my parents at a very young age, and later lived by their faith." He is very proud of such a syncretic maqam located in his locality. His words and expressions highlight that.

Ravi says, "I am a mercenary. From morning until night, I have no time to set aside for beliefs. But once a month, I go to the temple and the Theyotuchira Sufi shrine. I put money in the box to

meet the needs, and then I pray." The synergistic nature of Ravi's practices can be understood from this. He continues to say that "the Theyyottuchira Maqam is inclusive. And it should stay that way. Because it makes people feel that they cannot stand together as one. It is the church of truth. Everyone has faith. People come even from far away."

Many events, like vows and dhikr, are held there. Food giving and vowing is a programme in which everyone participates. I go every year. Often, my Muslim friends also go together for food donations. There is no caste or religion in Theyyottuchira. Not only this, but Theyyottuchira is a support and shade for the community itself. Rice and other essentials are auctioned there. Then he shared his experience. I had also bought rice in the last auction. It is cheaper than outside. That's what I still cook at my house. It is clear from Ravi's words that the tradition of Theyyotyuchira further improves people's relationships and influences their ideology and practice.

Illustration 10

Ramlath, 33 years old, is an active participant in events in the Theyyottuchira Sufi Maqam. She is EK Sunni, married, and a follower of the Muslim League. Received school education until the 9th standard and the 4th standard of religious education. Her parents were followers of the practices of the Theyyottuchira Sufi Maqam, and they were also knowledgeable about the maqam and proud of its harmonious tradition. They were not well educated and not economically strong. But her childhood is very inclusive; she has many friends from other religions.

Ramlath says with pride, "I am Muslim, but my tradition includes all humans, irrespective of their religion. In my religious perspective, that only includes Islam; there is no other religion. But I never consider religion in my relationships." In this, it is very clear that she has cultural harmony in her ideology and practice.

She opened by saying, "Theyyottuchira Sufi Maqam, treat everyone alike; we need everyone. Do not oppose anyone. Papa

(Kammu Sufi) will show you the answer." When it comes time for vows and almsgiving, everyone gathers; there is no such thing as a Hindu or Muslim. Other religious people also come on other days; they will light a sandalwood candle on the head of the Kammu Papa (Kammu Sufi), put money in the box, pray, and return. All this creates unity among people. All this is a miracle. All this is happening because of the light of the Kammu Papa.

Since the maqam sees everyone as the same, when someone comes (regardless of religion), we tell them to come, sit down, and give them water. I also contribute to Puram and Onam. For me, Hindu and Muslim are the same. It is clear from this that the harmonious attitude of the maqam influences people.

Ramlath shared her experience: "I have been participating in vows and annadanam since the age of 12. I see people of all castes in the queue. Upper castes and lower castes will be there. Most of them are economically backward. Everyone comes on other days too. Everyone has faith here. It is the maqam of truth." Ramlath's words highlight that she was proud of the maqam and its heritage. She wants to continue this harmonious life in the community.

Sociological Analysis and Interpretations

Cultural Syncretism:

The Theyyottuchira Sufi *Maqam* stands as a unique symbol of cultural syncretism, where the integration of multiple religious, caste, and cultural practices has cultivated a sense of unity and social cohesion within the community. This study uncovers how the *Maqam* fosters an environment of inclusivity and harmony, particularly through its ideological and practical dimensions.

Syncretism in Ideology:

Human Values over Religious Differences- The residents of Theyyottuchira firmly believe that human relationships transcend caste and religious boundaries. A key observation is that everyone, regardless of their religion, is welcomed at the *Maqam*. This perspective is deeply ingrained in their community ethos. All

participants in the study echo the sentiment that “blood is one,” emphasizing the shared humanity over religious or caste identity.

Inclusivity at the Core of Belief- The ideological foundation of the Theyyottuchira community rests on the idea of inclusivity. The *Maqam* does not differentiate between individuals based on their caste, religion, or profession. “It is very clear that Kammu Sufis do not make any distinction between Hindu and Muslim,” said one participant. The residents strongly believe that the *Maqam* represents religious harmony, a belief that is deeply embedded in their everyday lives. They see it as an asset to the community, a space where social justice and equality are upheld.

Cultural Syncretism as a Source of Pride- The community takes pride in their tradition of religious harmony and cultural syncretism. “It is the *Maqam's* tradition to include all regardless of their religion,” one participant mentioned. The belief in the unity of human beings, regardless of religious backgrounds, is a source of pride for the residents of Theyyottuchira. It is this very belief that promotes a collective sense of belonging and community spirit, strengthening their shared ideology of inclusivity and unity.

Syncretism in Practices: Collective Participation and Shared Rituals

The ‘Annadanam’ a festival for All- One of the most prominent practices at Theyyottuchira is the *Annadanam*, a community meal that is accessible to everyone, regardless of their religious or caste affiliations. *Annadanam* is a festival for the land, and there is no religious difference between anyone, a participant shared. The *Annadanam* is not just a food distribution event but a cultural celebration where all come together to share in the spirit of unity.

Participation in Local Festivals- In addition to the *Annadanam*, the community also actively participates in other local festivals, such as Onam and Pooram, which are celebrated with no religious barriers. “We participate in all festivals such as Pooram and Onam; religion does not stop us from celebrating together,” another

participant commented. These festivals are times of communal bonding, where people from all walks of life come together to celebrate. The participation of individuals from different religious backgrounds in these festivals further reinforces the idea of syncretism in practice.

Social Support across Boundaries- Theyyottuchira *Maqam* is not only a religious place of worship but also a center of social support. “The *Maqam* plays a major role in the marriage of girls and the treatment of patients, irrespective of caste and creed,” one participant stated. It plays an essential role in life events such as marriages, medical emergencies, and personal tribulations, providing help to people regardless of their religious background. This reflects the community’s commitment to support and care for one another, transcending religious divisions.

Impact of Syncretism: Unity and Social Cohesion:

Strengthening Social Bonds- Cultural syncretism at the Theyyottuchira *Maqam* fosters deeper connections between people. By upholding human values and prioritizing collective well-being, the *Maqam* serves as a space where individuals from different religious and social backgrounds engage in meaningful relationships. “In Theyyottuchira, we are all equal, regardless of the religion we follow,” said a participant. These interactions help reduce social barriers and increase understanding among community members.

Promoting Social Justice- The community adheres to the concept of social justice, and the *Maqam* is central to promoting this value. “In Theyyottuchira, it is about human values. No matter what religion we follow, we all share the same blood,” another participant emphasized. The belief that there are no barriers to entry at the *Maqam*, and that everyone is treated equally, reinforces the principles of fairness and equality. This ideology supports the creation of a society that is just and cohesive.

Cultural Syncretism as a Community Asset- The residents of Theyyottuchira view their cultural syncretism not only as a tradition but as a valuable asset to their community. “We are proud of the

tradition of religious harmony here; this is our real asset,” one participant said. It enables a peaceful coexistence where religious differences are set aside, and the shared belief in unity and human dignity prevails. The *Maqam* plays a crucial role in nurturing this harmonious environment and creating a sense of collective identity.

Major Observations

1. The community surrounding the Theyyottuchira Sufi *Maqam* upholds a strong sense of cultural syncretism, where individuals from diverse religious backgrounds coexist harmoniously.
2. The ideological framework of the community emphasizes human values over religious distinctions, promoting inclusivity and unity among its members.
3. Participants attribute their exposure to the Sufi *Maqam* to familial influences, indicating a deep-rooted cultural transmission within the community.
4. The *Maqam* serves as a unifying force, fostering unity and universality among individuals transcending religious boundaries.
5. The Theyyottuchira Sufi *Maqam* played a major role in creating syncretism in the ideology and practice of the members of the community.
6. Practices such as *Annadanam* and communal participation in festivals like *Onam* and *Pooram* highlight the community's commitment to cultural integration and harmony.
7. The *Maqam's* involvement in social welfare activities, irrespective of caste or creed, reinforces the ethos of cultural syncretism.
8. Cultural syncretism within the community extends beyond religious realms, creating a shared cultural space where diversity is celebrated and embraced.
9. The impact of cultural syncretism is profound, promoting cooperation, understanding, and mutual respect among

community members, and fostering social cohesion and harmony.

Conclusion

The Theyyottuchira Sufi *Maqam* stands as a powerful symbol of cultural syncretism, where the blending of diverse religious and cultural practices fosters unity, mutual respect, and social cohesion. Through its inclusive ideology and practices, the *Maqam* has not only shaped the values of its community but has also contributed to creating an environment where human connections transcend religious and caste-based differences. The collective participation in communal activities, such as *Annadanam* and the celebration of festivals, further strengthens the bond among community members, reinforcing the principles of inclusivity and harmony.

The impact of cultural syncretism at Theyyottuchira *Maqam* extends beyond individual beliefs to influence the community's social fabric, promoting cooperation and a sense of shared identity. In this way, the *Maqam* exemplifies how a space of spiritual and cultural convergence can foster a more cohesive, egalitarian society, where diversity is celebrated and cherished. The traditions of Theyyottuchira *Maqam* serve as a reminder of the profound possibilities for unity in diversity, highlighting the importance of cultural syncretism in building stronger, more inclusive communities.

In conclusion, the cultural syncretism emerging around a Theyyottuchira Sufi *Maqam* highlights the dynamic interplay of religious, social, and cultural elements within a shared sacred space. This phenomenon underscores the *Maqam's* role as more than a site of spiritual devotion; it functions as a social nexus where diverse traditions converge, fostering a sense of community and shared identity. Sociologically, such syncretism offers critical insights into how pluralistic societies navigate differences, construct meaning, and sustain social cohesion amidst diversity. By bridging cultural boundaries, the *Maqam* serves as a testament to the adaptability of spiritual traditions and their capacity to mediate

and reflect broader societal transformations. Future research could further explore the implications of this syncretism for interfaith dialogue and communal resilience in an increasingly interconnected world. As per Clifford Geertz's symbolic/interpretive idea, the rituals performing in the *Maqam* like *Urus* (annual death day observation of chief Sufi saints) procession, lighting of lamps, offerings, chanting *dikhrs* (phrases or prayers are repeatedly reciting for the purpose of remembering God) etc. are not only acts of devotion but symbolic enactments of social values. The collective meal in a *Maqam* festival symbolizes equality, solidarity and pluralism beyond caste, class and religion. Through Geertz's lens the festivals and gatherings in a *Maqam* says something about how society envisions unity in diversity. Geertz would see this as multi-vocality of symbols such as one *Maqam*, multiple meanings yet shared participation which symbolizes reconciliation of differences where abstract values like harmony, peace, unity etc. turn in to visible performative actions. Thus, the *Maqam* is not just a shrine but a living cultural symbol, a stage where society enacts its vision of peaceful coexistence.

Endnotes

1. Maqam: is a Muslim shrine constructed at a site linked to a religious figure or saint.
2. Sufism: A mystical and spiritual dimension of Islam emphasising the inward journey of self-discovery, devotion, and union with the divine. Sufism emphasises love, compassion, and the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment through practices such as meditation, chanting, and contemplation.
3. EK Sunni: EK Sunni is a prominent group within Kerala Sunni Muslims under the leadership of EK Aboobakar Musliyar.
4. Pooram: Is a Hindu temple festival celebrated in Kerala, India. And is a significant part of the state's cultural landscape

5. Onam: Is an annual harvest and Hindu cultural festival celebrated mostly by the people of Kerala.
6. Sadya: is a Kerala special vegetarian feast including rice with ten different other side dishes. Served during special occasions like Onam and marriage.
7. Kammu Papa: The local people in Theyyottuchira called Kammu Sufi as "Kammu Papa." It's to express their respect and love to him.
8. SSLC: SSLC is the short form of secondary school leaving certificate.
9. Desheeya Grameena Thozhilurapp Padhathi: It is the local Malayalam usage of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)
10. Cheruman: It is a lower caste among Hindus in Kerala.
11. Annadanam: the practice of donating food to those in need.
12. Yaram: is an Arabic term using for Tomb or graveyard which refers to a place of burial and it is especially used for a Muslim cemetery or a grand tomb built to honour someone.
13. AP Sunni: AP Sunni is a prominent group within Kerala Sunni Muslims under the leadership of AP Aboobakar Musliyar.
14. Pujari: 'Pujari' is a designation given to the Hindu temple pries.
15. Numboothiri: Malayali Brahmin caste called as Namboodiri.
16. Theyyottuchira Community: The group of individuals sharing common interests, values, and affiliations within the context of Theyyottuchira Sufi *Maqam*. Communities may be defined by geographical proximity, cultural heritage, religious affiliation, or shared experiences, and they often serve as sources of social support, belonging, and identity.

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**Sociological Perspectives on the COVID-19 Pandemic:
Inequality, Behaviour, and Change in India**

Venkataramanappa*

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly reshaped Indian society, exposing structural inequalities and transforming social behaviour, institutional roles, and community life. This study presents a sociological analysis of the pandemic's impact on the Indian community by integrating classical and contemporary theories including those of Durkheim, Merton, and Parsons with empirical data across sectors such as health, education, labour, and digital access. Adopting a qualitative, interpretive approach, the study draws on secondary sources and national datasets to examine how the crisis redefined social norms, amplified class and caste disparities, and altered power relations between the state and civil society. Through thematic and theoretical triangulation, the paper highlights the relevance of role theory, strain theory, and conflict perspectives in interpreting the lived experiences of marginalized groups. The findings emphasize that COVID-19 is not only a public health emergency but also a sociological event that demands a rethinking of modern lifestyles, institutional resilience, and inclusive policy frameworks for future preparedness

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Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, Indian community, social inequality, structural change, behavioural adaptation, institutional response.

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly reshaped Indian society, acting as both a biological crisis and a sociological turning point. While the virus posed a universal health threat, its transmission and consequences were deeply influenced by existing social inequalities particularly in access to basic amenities like clean water, healthcare, and sanitation (Dibyachintan et al., 2020). The outbreak exposed and exacerbated structural vulnerabilities, with marginalized communities disproportionately bearing the brunt of its impact. In India, these fault lines became particularly visible in the unorganized sector, which faced devastating job losses and mass reverse migration during nationwide lockdowns (Yadav & Perwaiz, 2020).

Beyond public health, the pandemic triggered a broad reconfiguration of social life affecting economic stability, educational access, mental health, and institutional trust. The atmosphere of risk and uncertainty also led to new forms of exclusion and reshaped power dynamics between the state and the citizenry (Bhardwaj, 2021). This highlights the urgent need for a sociological perspective to interpret the pandemic not just through epidemiological data, but through the lived realities of Indian communities, which are shaped by caste, class, gender, and regional disparities.

Sociological theory provides a useful framework to analyse these changes. The pandemic has influenced all three central dimensions of sociological inquiry: social behaviour, social organization, and social change. Structural functionalist theories, such as those of Radcliffe Brown, Parsons, and Merton, help explain the reorientation of roles, norms, and institutional responses (Ritzer, 2011). The disruption of daily routines, educational delivery, and work culture signalled a transformation in what Merton (1957) referred to as the “role set” the interconnected roles associated with a single social

status. For example, schoolteachers and doctors faced major shifts in their professional and interpersonal responsibilities as digital platforms and physical distancing redefined their modes of interaction (Parsons, 1951).

Policymakers faced the dilemma of balancing public health imperatives with economic survival. Lockdowns, while crucial for infection control, intensified existing insecurities among workers in both organized and informal sectors (ILO, 2020). The psychological toll was also widespread, with anxiety, depression, and fear prevalent even among those who retained employment (UNESCO, 2020). These emotional and behavioural shifts reflect the dynamic interplay between individual agency and structural constraints, a core concern of modern sociological theory (Giddens, 1984).

Finally, community-based organizations, civil society, and NGOs emerged as critical actors in India's pandemic response, especially where state capacity was lacking. Their interventions ranging from food distribution to mental health support illustrate how social solidarity can operate outside formal institutions. As people began to adapt to a world reshaped by viral risk, particularly in high-exposure "red zones," their behavioural adjustments, role adaptations, and institutional engagements became rich sites for sociological interpretation (WHO, 2021).

In this context, the present study seeks to examine how COVID-19 has restructured the social fabric of the Indian community, using empirical evidence and established sociological theories to analyse both the visible and invisible shifts in behaviour, structure, and collective identity. Rather than viewing the pandemic solely through biomedical or administrative lenses, this paper interprets it as a critical sociological event one that reveals deeper truths about inequality, adaptation, and the resilience of social systems in India.

This study does not treat the Indian community as a homogeneous unit but rather as a complex and stratified social

fabric influenced by caste, class, gender, and region. The analysis is anchored in sociological theory and applies these frameworks specifically to Indian realities making the study both context-specific and theoretically grounded.

Review of Literature

A sociological analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic in India requires a multidimensional engagement with both global and local academic discourse. While international studies have contributed to understanding broad behavioural responses and policy frameworks, Indian scholars have emphasized structural inequities, governance failures, and the complex interplay between caste, class, gender, and regional disparities. This section presents a thematic review of relevant literature contextualized to the Indian experience.

Caste, Social Exclusion, and Marginalization

The pandemic disproportionately affected lower caste communities and tribal groups due to long standing structural inequalities. Deshpande (2020) highlighted how Dalit and Adivasi households faced food insecurity, reduced access to healthcare, and exclusion from relief schemes. The lack of caste disaggregated COVID-19 data further hindered targeted policy interventions.

Further, Gautam and Patil (2021) argue that upper caste dominance in political and administrative leadership often shaped pandemic management in ways that marginalized already vulnerable caste groups.

Gendered Impacts and Care Work Inequality

Women bore a significant socio economic and emotional burden during the pandemic. Sharma and Vyas (2021) found that unpaid domestic work increased dramatically, particularly for women in low-income households. Additionally, the National Commission for Women reported a 2.5x increase in domestic violence complaints during lockdowns.

Nair and Vijayakumar (2021) further show that rural women in India had limited access to digital services, reducing

their ability to benefit from online healthcare, education, and livelihood programs.

Informal Labour and Migrant Displacement

Srivastava (2021) described India's internal migrant crisis as a "catastrophic governance failure", wherein reverse migration was triggered by lack of social security, housing, or transportation. He argues that the informal workforce which constitutes over 80% of India's labour was left unsupported by most state mechanisms.

The Centre for Policy Research (2020) also documented that migrants' lack of ration cards and identity documents prevented them from accessing PDS and state entitlements, exacerbating hunger and distress.

Education, Technology, and the Digital Divide

School closures impacted nearly 247 million students in India, disproportionately affecting students from rural and tribal backgrounds. Jandhyala (2021) notes that only 24% of Indian households had access to the internet, and fewer than 11% in rural India had access to computers.

UNESCO (2020) has warned of a "lost generation" of learners due to digital illiteracy and resource inequality. The sociological implications point to deepening class stratification and reducing future mobility for marginalized youth.

Public Health Inequities and Institutional Response

Sundararaman (2021) contrasted Kerala's decentralized health model built on strong public health systems and community health workers with the failures in northern states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, where health infrastructure was overstretched and underfunded.

Sharma (2022) adds that in many states, private hospitals became the primary source of treatment, excluding large populations due to high out of pocket expenses.

Mental Health, Social Isolation, and Class Stratification

The psychological toll of the pandemic was unevenly distributed. Raghavan and Thomas (2021) highlight that

working class families suffered higher rates of anxiety, job stress, and domestic distress, with limited access to mental health services.

Dasgupta (2021) argues that India's mental health narrative remained middle class centric, side-lining rural and blue-collar populations.

Social Behaviour, Risk Perception, and Information Ecosystems

Studies by Hamilton et al. (2020) and Ioseliani & Zarubina (2021) revealed how social behavior such as mask wearing, vaccination acceptance, and social distancing were shaped by both cultural values and trust in government institutions.

In India, the misuse of social media, religious misinformation, and stigma toward COVID-19 patients (especially frontline workers) reflected a social anomie situation, echoing Durkheim's framework.

Theoretical Framework: Understanding the Pandemic Sociologically

This study applies sociological theory as an analytical lens to understand the multifaceted impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Indian community. Theories from classical and modern sociology are used to interpret how the pandemic influenced collective behavior, deepened social inequalities, disrupted norms, and triggered systemic strain across various sectors. Each framework is aligned with specific patterns observed in Indian society during 2020–2021, allowing for a deeper understanding of the structural and behavioural dynamics of crisis response.

Sociological theory provides essential tools for interpreting the multifaceted social changes triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Through classical and contemporary theoretical lenses, the crisis can be understood not merely as a biomedical or public health issue, but as a moment of structural, behavioural, and moral disruption in society.

Emile Durkheim argued that moments of social upheaval often led to anomie, a breakdown of moral regulation and collective values (Durkheim, 1897). In the Indian context, behaviours like panic buying, vaccine hesitancy, and stigma toward infected individuals reflect weakening solidarity. The collapse of shared norms and the rise of fear-based individualism underscored a moral crisis in Indian society.

Merton's concept of social structure and anomie (Merton, 1957) helps explain the stress produced when institutional means fail to meet societal goals. In India, the closure of employment, healthcare overload, and online learning barriers disrupted normative expectations.

Merton's concept of role sets is also particularly relevant. Healthcare workers, for instance, were expected to simultaneously fulfil the roles of caregiver, educator, family member, and institutional face often under extreme pressure. Conflict theorists argue that crises expose and intensify existing inequalities (Ritzer, 2011). During the pandemic, access to healthcare, online education, and government relief was deeply shaped by class, caste, and geographic location. Lower-income groups, internal migrants, and Dalit households faced greater risk and fewer protections, validating the premise that power structures mediate access to resources.

The pandemic is also a wake-up call in terms of environmental sociology. Ulrich Beck's Risk Society thesis posits that modern societies manufacture new risks (Beck, 1992). The spread of COVID-19 has been linked to urban encroachment, loss of biodiversity, and global mobility all products of unsustainable development.

Symbolic interactionism helps explain how everyday behaviours during the pandemic took on new social meanings. Actions like wearing a mask, avoiding handshakes, or clapping for health workers were not just functional they symbolized solidarity, fear, or compliance (Bulmer, 1969). In India, stigma also emerged around COVID-19 survivors, frontline workers, and even burial grounds.

Sociological Perspectives on the COVID-19 Pandemic: Inequality, Behaviour, and Change in India

Table 1: Summary of Key Literature Themes and Theoretical Applications

Theme / Area	Key Findings from Literature	Author(s) & Year	Relevant Sociological Theory	Theoretical Insight Applied to Indian Context
Caste and Social Exclusion	Caste-based inequalities worsened pandemic outcomes for Dalits and Adivasis.	Deshpande (2020); Gautam & Patil (2021)	Conflict Theory	Structural inequalities excluded marginal groups from healthcare and welfare responses.
Gender and Unpaid Care Work	Women faced increased domestic work, job loss, and digital exclusion; domestic violence surged.	Sharma & Vyas (2021); Nair & Vijayakumar (2021)	Feminist Sociology	Gender burdens increased; digital inequality disproportionately affected rural women.
Migrant Labour and Informal Economy	Migrant workers were stranded due to lack of support, highlighting governance gaps.	Srivastava (2021); CPR (2020)	Merton's Strain Theory	Institutional neglect caused strain, insecurity, and reverse migration.
Digital Divide in Education	Rural and poor students had limited access to devices and connectivity for online learning.	Jandhyala (2021); UNESCO (2020)	Conflict Theory / Structural Functionalism	Educational inequities deepened, reducing long-term mobility for disadvantaged learners.
Public Health Inequality	Stark contrast between Kerala's public health response and failures in states like Bihar and UP.	Sundararaman (2021); Sharma (2022)	Structural Functionalism / Conflict Theory	Unequal health governance reflected regional disparity in institutional capacity.

Mental Health Stratification	Poorer populations reported higher stress, depression, and trauma during lockdowns.	Raghavan & Thomas (2021); Dasgupta (2021)	Symbolic Interactionism / Conflict Theory	Mental health concerns were class-biased and underreported in non-urban/rural settings.
Social Behavior & Norms	Public attitudes shaped by misinformation, stigma, and symbolic practices like clapping or mask-wearing.	Hamilton et al. (2020); Ioseliani & Zarubina (2021)	Durkheim's Anomie / Symbolic Interactionism	Breakdown of normative consensus; symbolic gestures gained moral and cultural weight.
Environmental Risk and Modernity	COVID-19 linked to ecological degradation, zoonotic spillover, and risks of unplanned urbanization.	Beck (1992); India Forum (2021); Ritzer (2011)	Risk Society / Environmental Sociology	Modernity produced unforeseen risks, demanding sustainable development practices.
Role Strain in Professions	Frontline workers juggled multiple roles with limited resources and high exposure.	Merton (1957); WHO (2021)	Merton's Role Set Theory	Multiple, conflicting role expectations led to burnout among doctors, nurses, and educators.

Source: Compiled by Author

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research approach grounded in sociological theory. It is based on secondary data analysis, drawing from peer-reviewed journal articles, government databases, policy reports, institutional publications, and international sources such as the WHO, ILO, and UNESCO. Indian-specific data were sourced from platforms including covid19india.org, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, and research articles published in journals like Economic and Political Weekly, Social Change, and Indian Journal of Labour Economics.

The analysis covers the period from March 2020 to December 2021, capturing the first two major waves of the pandemic in India. The unit of analysis is the Indian community

examined across domains such as public health, education, labour, social behaviour, and state responses.

A thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring patterns in the pandemic's social impact, guided by established sociological theories (Durkheim, Merton, Parsons, Beck, and others). Data triangulation was achieved by comparing statistical trends, theoretical insights, and documented policy responses to ensure analytical rigor.

This methodology was chosen due to the ethical and logistical limitations of conducting primary fieldwork during the pandemic. Nevertheless, the paper strives to maintain validity through a robust engagement with diverse and credible secondary sources and a coherent application of sociological frameworks.

Analysis

Table 2 highlights the state-wise distribution of COVID-19 cases in India in 2021. Maharashtra, Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu reported the highest caseloads, reflecting urban density and testing capacities. In contrast, lower numbers in states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar may point to underreporting or weaker health infrastructure. Southern states also showed better recovery rates, suggesting more efficient health systems. The overall figures illustrate stark regional disparities in pandemic response, healthcare access, and data transparency, offering valuable insights into India's uneven public health landscape.

Table 2: Statistics of COVID-19 in India 2021

State/UT	Confirmed	Active	Recovered	Deceased
Maharashtra	57,13,215	2,76,573	53,39,838	94,030
Karnataka	25,67,449	3,50,066	21,89,064	28,298
Kerala	24,94,386	2,33,031	22,52,505	8,456
Tamil Nadu	20,39,716	3,10,157	17,06,298	23,261
Uttar Pradesh	16,88,152	46,201	16,21,743	20,208

Venkataramanappa

Andhra Pradesh	16,71,742	1,73,622	14,87,382	10,738
Delhi	14,24,646	13,035	13,87,538	24,073
West Bengal	13,54,956	1,02,398	12,37,290	15,268
Chhattisgarh	9,67,645	42,914	9,11,752	12,979
Rajasthan	9,36,162	56,628	8,71,283	8,251
Gujarat	8,05,617	38,703	7,57,124	9,790
Madhya Pradesh	7,77,349	30,899	7,38,491	7,959
Odisha	7,56,684	95,266	6,58,646	2,772
Haryana	7,53,937	23,094	7,22,711	8,132
Bihar	7,04,173	21,084	6,78,036	5,052
Telangana	5,74,026	36,917	5,33,862	3,247
Punjab	5,62,831	42,177	5,06,349	14,305
Assam	4,03,623	54,948	3,44,083	3,245
Jharkhand	3,36,240	10,945	3,20,336	4,959
Uttarakhand	3,27,112	31,110	2,83,962	6,360
Jammu and Kashmir	2,86,684	39,255	2,43,588	3,841
Himachal Pradesh	1,88,604	16,989	1,68,524	3,070
Goa	1,54,419	15,056	1,36,766	2,597
Puducherry	1,03,826	12,167	90,141	1,518
Chandigarh	59,740	2,466	56,534	740
Tripura	50,736	7,079	43,130	504
Manipur	48,850	8,030	40,044	776
Meghalaya	34,448	7,741	26,156	551
Arunachal Pradesh	26,778	3,918	22,746	114
Nagaland	21,371	4,982	15,414	350
Ladakh	18,448	1,603	16,658	187
Sikkim	14,913	3,838	10,616	247

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Mizoram	11,988	3,089	8,863	3
Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu	10,203	317	9,849	4
Lakshadweep	7,631	1,978	5,596	31
Andaman and Nicobar Islands	6,964	191	6,660	113
India	2,79,05,264	21,18,467	2,54,49,578	3,26,062

Source: <https://www.covid19india.org/>

- Economic Disruption and Unemployment Trends
- Data from CMIE revealed that during India's initial lockdown, the unemployment rate escalated from 6.7% to 26%, with approximately 140 million job losses primarily within the informal sector (Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy [CMIE], 2020)
- Sociological Insight: These figures reflect acute role strain and economic anomie where social expectations (e.g., breadwinning) clash with structural failures. Merton's strain theory illuminates how institutions failed to mitigate these pressures, especially for vulnerable groups.
- Life Expectancy Decline Reflecting Structural Fragility
- The International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) noted that India's life expectancy at birth declined by 1.6 years, from 70.4 (2019) to 68.8 (2021). In states like Gujarat, Punjab, and Haryana, the decline was over 3 years, with a greater drop among men (2.2 years) compared to women (0.5 years), (Times of India, 2024).
- Sociological Insight: This decline suggests that not only did COVID-19 exact a heavy biological toll, but it also disproportionately impacted regions with weak health systems and social safety nets, amplifying existing inequalities (Conflict Theory).

Sociological Interpretation of Key Findings

- **Institutional Trust and Governance:** Kerala known for strong public health managed more resiliently, whereas under-resourced states like Bihar and Telangana struggled highlighting how institutional effectiveness and social equity are deeply intertwined with crisis outcomes.
- **Informal Sector Vulnerability:** Job losses and shutdowns disproportionately affected unorganized workers, reflecting the conflict neo-Marxist critique of capitalist precarity.
- **Gender and Life Expectancy:** Declining male life expectancy suggests gendered vulnerabilities, possibly due to occupational exposure and health access differences.
- **Data Invisibility:** The excess mortality figures underscore the symbolic interactionist concept that what is “officially visible” is shaped by institutional credibility and social stigma some deaths remained “invisible” due to late registration or misclassification.

Table 3: Key Data Points on COVID-19 in India – Interpretation through Sociological Lens

Indicator / Data	Data Value / Summary	Source	Sociological Interpretation
Excess Mortality in Telangana (2021)	31,298 excess deaths (6x official COVID deaths)	Times of India (2024)	Underreporting reflects institutional opacity and governance gaps in vital registration and death certification
Life Expectancy Decline (India)	Drop by 1.6 years (2019–2021); up to 3 years in Gujarat, Punjab, Haryana	IIPS Study, reported in TOI (2024)	Reflects structural health inequalities and pandemic’s long-term demographic effect on vulnerable regions

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National Unemployment Spike (April–May 2020)	Unemployment rose from 6.7% to 26% ; 140 million job losses, mostly informal sector	Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE); PMC Journal (2022)	Demonstrates Merton's strain theory and economic anomie; workers' means to survive were institutionally unsupported
Migrant Crisis and Displacement	Over 10 million migrants displaced during lockdown; walked hundreds of kilometres	International Labour Organization (ILO); Economic & Political Weekly	Reveals state neglect of informal labour; supports conflict theory on capitalist systems abandoning low-income workers
Digital Education Divide	Only 24% Indian households had internet for online learning during school closures	UNESCO, NSSO, Jandhyala (2021)	Illustrates education stratification; digital exclusion reflects class and rural-urban disparities
Healthcare Access Disparities (State wise)	Kerala managed effective response; Bihar, UP struggled due to weak infrastructure	Sundararaman (2021); MoHFW	Highlights institutional capacity gaps; structural functionalism explains uneven response across Indian states
Mental Health Impact	Depression cases rose by 20% ; low-income households had highest anxiety levels	NIMHANS, Raghavan & Thomas (2021)	Shows class-based psychological vulnerability; symbolic interactionism explains differential emotional impact
Telemedicine Adoption Increase	Consultations via telemedicine rose by over 300%	Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (2021)	Shift reflects adaptive behaviour and transformation of doctor–patient social roles (role set theory)

<p>E-commerce and Online Retail Growth</p>	<p>Online retail grew by 40% in 2020; digital commerce by 30%</p>	<p>IAMAI (2021), Statista (2021)</p>	<p>Indicates behavioural shift and role change in consumption patterns, aligned with social action theory</p>
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Table 3 enhances the analytical depth of this study by systematically organizing key datasets and linking them with relevant sociological theories. This structured format allows for a more nuanced interpretation of the pandemic’s diverse impacts across different domains of Indian society. By triangulating empirical evidence, credible data sources, and theoretical frameworks—such as conflict theory, symbolic interactionism, and strain theory—the table offers a cohesive understanding of how structural inequalities, institutional gaps, and behavioural responses intersected during the COVID-19 crisis. This integrated approach reinforces the paper’s core objective of interpreting the pandemic not merely as a public health emergency, but as a profound sociological phenomenon reshaping the Indian community.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has acted as a sociological rupture in Indian society, revealing entrenched inequalities, institutional fragilities, and adaptive capacities within communities. This study has shown that the pandemic's impact was neither uniform nor purely biomedical it was deeply shaped by social structures such as caste, class, gender, and region. The data analysed across domains from excess mortality and job losses to digital divides and mental health burdens reflect how pre-existing vulnerabilities were amplified during the crisis.

Through the integration of classical sociological theories and empirical data, the study has interpreted the pandemic as a moment of moral crisis (Durkheim), structural strain (Merton), and role transformation (Parsons). These frameworks helped explain not only the visible institutional failures but also the less visible shifts in everyday behaviour, social cohesion, and trust in governance. The tabled evidence triangulates statistical

patterns with theoretical insights, revealing how the pandemic restructured role sets, altered normative expectations, and forced individuals and institutions to renegotiate their functions in society.

For the Indian community, the pandemic catalysed both disruption and innovation. While marginalized populations experienced deepening inequality and exclusion, community-based organizations and local networks emerged as critical agents of support and resilience. This duality underscores the need for sociology not only as a tool for critique but also as a lens for reimagining adaptive, inclusive, and equitable responses to future crises.

COVID-19 must be understood as a transformative sociological event that demands sustained reflection. It challenges us to reevaluate our institutional designs, revisit the ethics of care and cooperation, and reconfigure public policy through the principles of equity, empathy, and evidence. A sociology-informed response is vital—not only to understand the pandemic’s legacy but also to build a more just and resilient society in its aftermath.

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Empowering Women Workers in Kerala: A Path to Equal Pay

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Abstract

This study investigates gender-based wage discrimination against women workers in Kerala's unorganised and private sectors, with a focus on unaided educational institutions, retail and textile industries, the hospitality sector, and caregiving professions. Through qualitative interviews and thematic analysis, the research reveals a consistent pattern of wage disparity, wherein women receive lower remuneration than men for comparable roles and responsibilities. These inequalities are sustained by entrenched patriarchal attitudes, the undervaluation of women's labour, and weak enforcement of labour regulations. The findings underscore the urgent need for unified wage policies, stronger regulatory mechanisms, and targeted awareness initiatives to address structural and cultural barriers. This study contributes to ongoing discourses on gender equity in the labour market and highlights the importance of policy-driven solutions for achieving economic justice for women workers in Kerala

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Discrimination typically refers to circumstances in which individuals with equal abilities are treated differently in the labour and capital markets, resulting in unequal opportunities to enhance their skills or resources. It represents the portion of inequality that arises from unjustified factors according to the country's current laws, widely accepted values, or recognized social norms. The question of gendered wage inequality has been a persistent concern in the field of labour economics and gender studies, especially within the Global South, where structural disparities continue to shape women's experiences in the workforce. In India, wage discrimination against women is not merely a symptom of economic disparity but a manifestation of deep-rooted social, cultural, and institutional biases that devalue women's labour. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and numerous legislative safeguards, including the Equal Remuneration Act of 1976, empirical evidence suggests that women are consistently paid less than men across nearly all sectors, particularly in the private and informal domains (ILO, 2018).

This disparity is exacerbated by factors such as occupational segregation, lack of regulatory oversight in private enterprises, and persistent patriarchal attitudes that associate men with productivity and women with domesticity. In sectors such as retail, nursing, education, domestic work, and textile industries, where women form a significant part of the labour force, wage differentials are not only prevalent but often normalized. Many of these jobs are characterized by precarious working conditions, long hours, the absence of written contracts, and limited access to grievance redressal mechanisms, making women particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Scholars have argued that wage inequality is a reflection of the gendered valuation of labour, wherein work traditionally performed by women is often considered unskilled or auxiliary, and thus less deserving of remuneration (Meagher & Kirton, 2013). Moreover, the

intersectionality of caste, class, religion, and region further deepens the vulnerabilities of women workers. Marginalized groups, especially Dalit and Adivasi women, face a compounded form of discrimination that limits their access not only to equal wages but also to upward mobility, job security, and collective representation (Deshpande, 2020).

This study critically investigates the phenomenon of wage discrimination faced by women in India's private sector, with particular attention to the socio-economic structures that enable such disparities. Drawing upon feminist economics and intersectionality theory, the research also aims to uncover the systemic mechanisms through which gendered wage gaps are sustained. It further seeks to provide policy recommendations for a more equitable and inclusive labour environment, emphasizing the need for grassroots-level legal enforcement, transparent wage structures, and unionization efforts that centre women's voices. In doing so, this research contributes to a broader understanding of how gender intersects with economic structures in post-liberalized India, revealing the urgent need for structural reform in both law and labour practices to ensure just and equal participation of women in the workforce (Chaudhary & Verick, 2014; ILO, 2018).

Research Objectives

- To examine the extent of wage disparities between male and female workers in Kerala's private sector.
- To understand the socio-economic and occupational factors contributing to wage discrimination against women.
- To explore the lived experiences of women workers in unaided schools, retail shops, textiles, and hospitality sectors regarding wage inequality.
- To analyse the role of institutional and informal mechanisms in perpetuating or mitigating gender-based wage discrimination.
- To propose actionable recommendations for reducing wage disparities and improving gender justice in the private workforce.

Literature Review

The gender wage gap remains a persistent global issue, and India is no exception. Scholars have long examined the economic, social, and institutional structures that perpetuate wage inequality between men and women. Studies indicate that women in India earn, on average, 20-30% less than men for the same work, despite increases in educational attainment and workforce participation (Deshpande, 2020; ILO, 2018). This disparity is even starker in the private sector, where regulatory oversight is limited, and discriminatory practices are often entrenched.

A significant body of research points to occupational segregation, both horizontal and vertical, as a root cause of unequal pay. Women are disproportionately employed in informal, low-paying, and care-based sectors such as domestic work, retail, and nursing jobs that are often undervalued and feminized (Mazumdar & Neetha, 2011). Even within the same sector, men are more likely to be promoted to supervisory or technical roles that command higher salaries (Rani & Belser, 2012). The undervaluation of female-dominated roles is not merely a market failure but reflects deeper ideological constructs that associate women's labour with lower economic worth.

Intersectional analyses further reveal that caste, class, and rural-urban divisions exacerbate gender-based wage discrimination. Dalit and Adivasi women, for instance, are overrepresented in the most precarious forms of labour and often face compounded marginalization (Thorat & Newman, 2007). Feminist economists have highlighted that economic models often ignore the unpaid and invisible labour of women, such as caregiving and domestic responsibilities, which indirectly contribute to their limited mobility and earning potential (Benería, 2003).

Furthermore, evidence suggests that state mechanisms like the Equal Remuneration Act (1976) have had limited success in curbing wage discrimination due to poor implementation, lack of awareness, and loopholes exploited by private employers (Menon

& Rodgers, 2015). While government sector jobs demonstrate relative parity in pay structures, the private sector continues to resist equitable practices under the guise of market efficiency and meritocracy.

Despite these challenges, recent literature also points to an emerging discourse around women's economic rights, supported by feminist advocacy, labour unions, and policy interventions. However, the translation of this discourse into substantive change remains slow and fragmented (Chaudhary, 2021).

Research Questions

1. What is the extent of wage disparities between male and female workers in Kerala's private sector?
2. What socio-economic and occupational factors contribute to wage discrimination against women in private employment?
3. How do women workers in unaided schools, retail shops, textile industries, and the hospitality sector experience and perceive wage inequality? Are there identifiable regional or sectoral variations in gender-based wage disparities within the private sector in Kerala?
4. What role do institutional practices (such as recruitment and promotion) and informal mechanisms (such as workplace culture) play in sustaining or challenging wage discrimination?
5. What policy or structural reforms can be implemented to address wage disparities and promote gender justice in Kerala's private workforce?

Methodology

This study adopts a field-oriented qualitative approach, relying on interviews and direct conversations with 50 women workers across different employment sectors in Kerala. The respondents were purposively selected from the private sector, covering textiles (12 respondents), retail shops (10 respondents), unaided schools (8 respondents), home nursing and caregiving (10

respondents), and the hospitality industry (10 respondents). To capture regional variations, respondents were drawn from both urban and rural areas: for instance, textile and retail workers were largely concentrated in urban centres, whereas caregiving and unaided schoolteachers were also well-represented in rural settings. This sampling strategy ensured that the data reflected diverse perspectives from women engaged in informal and semi-formal employment spaces in both contexts, where wage discrimination was found to be particularly widespread.

The narratives collected through these interviews were instrumental in highlighting real-life experiences of wage discrimination and unequal treatment. Semi-structured interviews were employed to allow respondents the flexibility to express their views freely, while maintaining thematic consistency across the data. These first-hand accounts provided critical insights into how gender biases manifest in everyday work environments, with particular attention to wage differences between men and women performing the same roles.

To contextualize and validate these findings, the study also engaged extensively with secondary literature, including academic articles, government reports, and surveys. This review traced broader trends and offered a comparative framework for understanding how gender-based wage disparities are treated in existing scholarship.

Furthermore, a comparative observation was made between the private and government sectors. Government employment spaces generally offer equal pay and better protections, whereas the private sector often remains unregulated, enabling systemic discrimination and informal wage negotiations to persist. This comparative lens deepens the analysis and highlights gaps in policy implementation and regulatory oversight.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in feminist sociological theory, particularly the intersectional framework developed by scholars like Kimberle Crenshaw (1989). Feminist theory challenges the

structural foundations of gender-based inequalities and highlights how institutionalised patriarchy manifests in labour markets, perpetuating unequal pay and exploitative working conditions for women. Central to this approach is the belief that gender is not a standalone category but is deeply interwoven with other axes of identity such as class, caste, and region, which collectively shape a woman's experience in the workforce.

Intersectionality, as introduced by Crenshaw, offers an analytical lens to explore how overlapping systems of oppression such as sexism, classism, and sometimes casteism intensify the discrimination women face, particularly in informal or semi-formal sectors. For example, a female worker in a retail textile shop may be subjected not only to wage disparity but also to diminished bargaining power due to her socio-economic status and limited access to social security or legal redressal mechanisms. Additionally, feminist labour theory critiques the undervaluation of women's work, especially in care and service sectors. Scholars like Nancy Folbre (2001) argue that such undervaluation stems from the historical association of women with unpaid or 'naturally caring' roles, which has systematically devalued their paid labour in similar sectors. These theories highlight how patriarchal ideologies not only shape employment structures but also rationalise unequal remuneration as socially acceptable or economically justified. Through employing these conceptual tools, this paper investigates the systemic roots of wage inequality and aims to demonstrate how both structural discrimination and cultural norms combine to reinforce gendered disparities in India's private sector workforce.

Wage Disparity in Unaided Educational Institutions

The private educational sector in Kerala, particularly unaided schools, reveals significant gender-based wage disparities. Through qualitative interviews conducted with women employees in various unaided institutions, it becomes evident that structural inequalities are deeply entrenched and normalized within these workplaces.

Interview data highlight a persistent pattern of wage differentiation based on gender. In urban areas, for example, a female teacher from an unaided school in Thiruvananthapuram reported receiving a monthly salary between RS: 18,000 and RS: 20,000, while her male counterparts earned RS: 25,000 to RS: 27,000 for the same work. In rural areas, a similar narrative emerged from an unaided school in Kerala, where female teachers earned between RS: 15,000 and RS: 18,000, compared to male teachers who received RS: 20,000 to RS: 25,000. These disparities, despite comparable qualifications and teaching responsibilities, point toward systemic gender-based wage discrimination. Such evidence corresponds with broader research in India, which highlights how wage structures in private education often mirror patriarchal biases. As Deshpande and Singh (2021) note, women in private educational institutions are frequently placed in less authoritative positions and paid lower salaries, even when their qualifications and experience are on par with male colleagues.

Normalization and Justification of Wage Inequality

Respondents noted that wage disparity is often normalized by school management through rationalizations such as “men are family breadwinners” or “men handle more responsibilities.” These justifications echo traditional gender roles that continue to influence employment practices in the private sector (Klasen & Pieters, 2015). Despite equal workloads, female teachers are considered supplementary earners, thereby justifying lower pay. Such normalization reflects not only a gender bias but also a lack of transparency in employment contracts and salary negotiations. Several women reported that salary discussions were informal and often conducted verbally, with no official documentation provided. This absence of formal employment structures further facilitates gender-based exploitation. One of the underlying reasons for such disparities is the lack of regulatory oversight in unaided institutions. As they fall outside the purview of strict government wage regulations, school managements often exercise unchecked discretion in salary decisions. As observed by Srivastava (2013), privatization of education in India has led to increased precarity for

teachers, particularly women, who are more likely to accept low wages due to limited job opportunities in the public sector.

Implications for Female Workforce Participation

Wage discrimination not only affects the economic independence of women but also has wider social implications. Lower wages disincentivize skilled women from entering or remaining in the education sector. It fosters a cycle of undervaluation of women's labour and contributes to their socio-economic marginalization. The devaluation of women's work in such a critical sector also perpetuates gender stereotypes among students, reinforcing inequality in the next generation.

This situation in Kerala mirrors national and global trends. Studies such as those by ILO (2022) highlight that even in regions with high female literacy, like Kerala, wage disparities persist in private sectors due to systemic and cultural factors. Further, Gupta (2019) notes that while Kerala has achieved gender parity in education, this does not translate into labour market equality especially in informal and semi-formal sectors like unaided education.

Wage Disparity in Retail and Textile Sectors

The retail and textile sectors in Kerala, particularly in urban and semi-urban areas, are significant employers of women. These industries are often perceived as accessible avenues for women due to relatively lower entry barriers, proximity to residential areas, and flexible employment arrangements (Narayana, 2020). However, the data collected from field interviews reveals a concerning pattern of wage disparities between male and female workers, reinforcing existing gender hierarchies within the labour market.

Female employees reported consistent wage disparities when compared to their male counterparts across both rural and urban retail sectors. In rural areas, women working in a wedding apparel store in Venjaramoodu and a clothing retailer in Kallara noted that their salaries were considerably lower than those of men employed in similar roles. A parallel pattern was evident in urban contexts as well, where women employed in a fabric outlet in

Kollam and a textile showroom in Kazhakoottam likewise reported earning less than male workers despite performing comparable tasks.

According to the interviewees, female workers in these outlets receive daily wages ranging from RS: 500 to RS: 700, whereas male workers performing similar duties are paid between RS: 900 and RS: 1200 per day. This consistent pattern suggests that gender-based wage discrimination is institutionalized within these sectors, regardless of the scale or branding of the retail outlet. The reasons behind these wage differentials are manifold. Firstly, employers often perceive men as more competent in handling tasks that require physical exertion or longer working hours, thus justifying higher remuneration (Singh & Singh, 2019). This perception persists even in cases where women perform the same functions, such as stocking, billing, and customer engagement. Secondly, social norms and familial obligations restrict women's working hours, which employers use as a justification for lower pay. However, as observed in the field, female employees often report working extended hours, especially during festive seasons and sales periods, without corresponding increases in pay.

The textile sector, in particular, displays a gendered division of labour that aligns with broader patriarchal labour practices. While men are often employed in roles such as floor managers or sales executives, women are more likely to be hired for customer assistance and support tasks, which are undervalued both in status and pay. This segmentation reflects larger national and regional trends, where female labour is systematically devalued due to cultural perceptions of productivity and responsibility (Jeyaranjan, 2016). Additionally, the lack of formal contracts or institutional oversight in many retail and textile shops contributes to the normalization of unequal pay. Workers rarely have access to grievance redressal mechanisms or labour unions, especially in privately owned and unaided sectors. This informal employment setting disproportionately disadvantages women, who are often less likely to question authority due to fear of job loss or social retaliation.

The narratives from the field highlight the emotional and financial strain caused by wage discrimination. Many female workers expressed frustration over the lack of recognition and fairness in compensation, despite their loyalty and hard work. One respondent from fabric outlet shared that despite working for over five years, her pay had increased only marginally, while newly recruited male workers started at higher wage brackets. Such stories underscore the deeply entrenched gender biases and the absence of performance-based appraisal systems in these sectors. The retail and textile industries in Kerala though progressive in terms of female workforce participation; remain sites of significant gender-based economic inequality. The persistence of patriarchal norms, informal employment arrangements, and lack of accountability perpetuates wage disparities, calling for urgent policy intervention and sector-specific labour regulations. There is a need to strengthen legal frameworks, promote workplace audits, and encourage the formation of women's collectives to ensure equitable pay practices in these growing sectors of the economy.

Discrimination in the Hospitality Sector

The hospitality sector in Kerala, like much of the broader Indian private sector, manifests clear and persistent wage disparities between male and female employees. This phenomenon is particularly visible in low-wage, informal, and semi-formal employment environments such as small hotels, catering services, and cleaning services. Field interviews demonstrate this divide across both rural and urban contexts. For instance, women workers employed in a rural hotel in Karette reported earning less than men despite performing equivalent tasks, while women engaged in an urban hotel in Kaniyapuram highlight systemic inequalities that are normalized and rarely contested.

One female worker at the rural hotel revealed that her daily wage amounts to RS: 650, while her male counterparts in similar roles earn RS: 1,100. This striking gap nearly doubles in some cases and is not attributed to differences in educational qualification, work experience, or workload. Instead, it reflects deeply ingrained

gender biases regarding the perceived value of women's labour in hospitality and service-oriented roles. This wage gap is not an isolated incident but resonates with a broader trend in the hospitality industry, where women are often relegated to lower-paid, less secure positions. As studies have shown, women in the Indian service sector, particularly in hospitality, are commonly paid less than men for similar work and are often confined to stereotypically "feminine" roles such as housekeeping, reception, or support services, which are undervalued both socially and economically (ILO, 2018; Chen et al., 2020). In contrast, men are more frequently employed in positions such as waiters, kitchen staff, or managerial roles, which offer better pay and upward mobility.

Moreover, the interviews reveal that informal mechanisms such as daily cash payments and lack of written contracts further exacerbate the vulnerability of female workers in this sector. Many women do not have access to grievance redressal systems, labour unions, or even basic legal knowledge about minimum wages and equal remuneration laws. This reflects a failure of institutional enforcement, where the gap between legislation and implementation remains wide (Kannan & Raveendran, 2019). Discrimination in hospitality is compounded by intersectional factors, including class and rural location. Most of the women interviewed were from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and lacked bargaining power or alternative employment opportunities. As a result, they tend to accept discriminatory wages out of necessity rather than choice. Their narratives not only reflect personal hardships but also exemplify how informal employment structures act as barriers to gender equity.

Unequal Pay in the Caregiving Sector

The caregiving sector, including nursing, home care, and support services, is typically dominated by female workers and often undervalued in terms of both wages and recognition. In Kerala, the feminization of caregiving has led to a normalization of lower wages for women, reinforcing systemic gender-based

economic disparities (Mazumdar & Neetha, 2011). The data collected through interviews with workers in this sector clearly illustrate the gendered wage gap in caregiving roles.

One of the most glaring examples comes from a home nurse based in a rural area of Kunduman, who reported earning Rs.15,000 per month. In contrast, her male counterparts in similar home nursing roles earn between Rs. 20,000 and Rs. 25,000 monthly. This significant difference in pay is not justified by qualification or experience, as she holds similar certifications and has years of experience in the field.

Rather, it appears to stem from societal perceptions that caregiving by women is an extension of their ‘natural’ nurturing role, and thus does not require fair economic compensation (Folbre, 2001). Such patterns align with broader national and international findings on wage discrimination in care work. The ILO (2018) notes that undervaluation of care work is a global phenomenon, and gender bias plays a critical role in wage setting. In the case of Kerala, despite the state’s reputation for progressive social indicators, these findings indicate the persistence of structural inequalities in wage distribution based on gender even in sectors that are central to the social fabric.

Additionally, the lack of regulatory oversight and the informal nature of employment in many caregiving arrangements contribute to wage exploitation. Employers often set wages based on gendered assumptions about dependency and availability, further marginalizing female workers. As observed in the interviews, women are expected to accept lower wages out of “gratitude” for employment or due to the belief that their income is supplementary rather than essential to household survival. These disparities are not only economic but also affect the dignity and social value of women’s labour.

Overall Patterns and Societal Trends

The testimonies and wage records collected from women workers in Kerala’s private sector, particularly from hospitality, caregiving, and small-scale food services, reveal broader patterns

of gender-based discrimination that are deeply embedded in the socio-economic fabric of the state. The most consistent patterns emerging from the data are the systemic undervaluation of “feminized” work. Jobs that are typically performed by women, such as caregiving, housekeeping, nursing, and food service, are perceived as extensions of traditional domestic roles. As a result, these roles are rarely recognized as skilled labour, and women are paid less than men even when performing equivalent or more labour-intensive tasks. This reflects what feminist economists term the “devaluation of women’s labour” in both private and public domains (Elson, 1999).

Another striking trend is the widespread normalization of wage inequality. Many women interviewed did not initially identify their pay disparities as discriminatory, citing job “gratitude” or the belief that their earnings are “secondary” to household incomes. This internalization of unequal status is a reflection of the broader patriarchal ideology that still governs labour relations in much of Indian society, including Kerala. Even when women are the primary breadwinners as in the case of migrant or widowed women, they often lack bargaining power due to the informal nature of employment and absence of labour protections.

Moreover, intersectional vulnerabilities based on class, caste, religion, and geographic location further deepen wage discrimination. A final but critical societal trend is the lack of effective regulatory mechanisms. Although Kerala has progressive labour laws and women’s commissions, enforcement in the informal sector remains weak. There is little monitoring of private employment conditions in caregiving or domestic service, and no standardized wage structure in sectors like small-scale food industries. As a result, discriminatory practices thrive under the radar of state oversight. These patterns collectively demonstrate that wage discrimination against women in Kerala’s informal service sector is not an anomaly but a structural issue rooted in gendered assumptions, weak policy enforcement, and socio-cultural norms. Addressing these injustices requires more than legal

reform; it necessitates a cultural shift in how society values and compensates women's labour.

Conclusion

This study examined the persistent issue of gender-based wage discrimination faced by women workers in Kerala's unorganised and private sectors, including unaided educational institutions, retail and textile outlets, hospitality services, and caregiving roles. Through qualitative interviews with female workers from various districts, the findings reveal a clear pattern of systemic inequality, where women consistently receive lower wages than their male counterparts for comparable roles and responsibilities. These disparities, rooted in deep-seated patriarchal structures and reinforced by the lack of regulatory enforcement, underscore the urgent need for structural reforms.

The analysis showed that unaided educational institutions, often outside the ambit of government regulation, offer significantly lower salaries to female teachers despite similar educational qualifications and workloads as male teachers. Retail and textile sectors further exemplify this disparity, where women are often underpaid and overworked. The hospitality and caregiving sectors reveal even starker examples of wage inequality, where the wage gap is compounded by gendered assumptions about caregiving as "natural" women's work.

These findings highlight not just individual-level discrimination but also broader societal attitudes that devalue women's labour. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and existing labour laws, enforcement remains weak, especially in informal and semi-formal employment contexts. The wage gap cannot be addressed without tackling the systemic and cultural norms that allow such inequality to persist. Therefore, this study calls for immediate policy intervention, including the formulation of unified wage policies across sectors, stringent monitoring mechanisms, and awareness campaigns targeting both employers and employees. Future research can expand this study across more districts and integrate the perspectives of male workers and

employers to create a holistic understanding of the wage gap. Ensuring economic justice for women workers is not merely a matter of legal compliance but a foundational step toward achieving gender equity in the broader socio-economic landscape of Kerala.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

1. Implementation of a Unified Wage Policy

A state-wide, sector-neutral unified wage policy must be introduced to ensure equal pay for equal work, regardless of gender. This policy should cover both organised and unorganised sectors, including unaided educational institutions, retail, textiles, hospitality, and caregiving. Such a framework must be enforceable with legally binding provisions, drawing on the principles of the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976, but updated to reflect contemporary labour realities.

2. Mandatory Wage Transparency and Audits

Institutions and private employers should be mandated to conduct annual wage audits, disaggregated by gender, to ensure transparency and accountability. These reports should be submitted to a dedicated state-level wage monitoring body and made publicly accessible. Wage transparency can serve as a deterrent to discriminatory pay practices (OECD, 2021).

3. Strengthening Labour Law Enforcement

Existing labour inspection mechanisms must be enhanced, especially in the unorganised and informal sectors where regulatory oversight is currently weak. The Labour Department should establish specialized units to monitor gender-based wage disparities and handle complaints effectively. Capacity building for inspectors with a gender-sensitive lens is also crucial.

4. Incentivising Gender-Equitable Employers

The state can introduce incentive-based schemes such as tax benefits, awards, or public recognition for institutions and employers who demonstrate compliance with gender-equal pay

norms and foster inclusive workplace policies. Such positive reinforcement can create a culture of equity.

5. Establishment of Sector-Specific Wage Boards

Wage boards should be constituted for major employment sectors, especially those heavily feminised (e.g., caregiving, textiles, hospitality). These boards must include representation from women workers, unions, and civil society organisations to negotiate minimum and fair wages reflective of the labour's value.

6. Legal Support and Grievance Redressal Mechanisms

Accessible and affordable legal aid must be provided to women facing wage discrimination. This includes strengthening grievance redressal cells within institutions and ensuring these bodies are equipped to handle cases of gender-based pay inequality promptly and impartially.

7. Gender Sensitisation and Awareness Campaigns

Long-term transformation requires changing societal attitudes toward women's labour. The government should conduct mass awareness campaigns aimed at employers, workers, and the public to deconstruct gender stereotypes, elevate the perception of women's work, and promote wage justice.

8. Support for Women's Trade Union Participation

Women's active participation in trade unions should be encouraged through capacity-building programs and leadership training. Unionisation has proven to be an effective tool in challenging wage inequality and securing better labour conditions for women (Kabeer, 2016).

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**Reproductive Health Care of Women in Rural Kerala:
A Socio-Cultural Analysis**

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Abstract

This study proposes to examine the socio-cultural factors influencing the reproductive health care of Kerala women. It was conducted in rural Kerala, where traditional behavior persists and acts as a barrier to the introduction of modern health care practices intended to reduce reproductive health hazards and contribute to the better health and well-being of women. A healthy population is a prerequisite for any country's socio-economic and technological development. Kerala, though the most highly literate and long-life expectancy state in India, is constrained by many ill-health problems and a lack of health care seeking. Women here are silent sufferers of ill health throughout their life course, mainly because of their low self-esteem and low perception of and negligence of their health. Even though women live longer than men, their quality of life is very poor. Many of these can be prevented or controlled through timely intervention and education. This article deals with health problems This article deals with health problems related care

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of women during their reproductive period. The research method adopted for this study was quantitative in nature. A total of 300 mothers in the age group 15-44 were selected as a sample from three districts of rural Kerala using simple random sampling technique. The primary tool of data collection was an interview schedule. The major finding of the study reveals that socio-cultural factors have a direct influence on the reproductive health care of women in Kerala.

Keywords: reproductive health, rural Kerala, socio-cultural factors, reproductive health care, antenatal care, natal care.

Health is a very broad concept, and reproductive health is a crucial component of a woman's general health. Reproductive health is defined as 'a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity in all matters relating to the reproductive system and its functions and processes (United Nations 1995:40). An examination of the reproductive health scenario of women in Kerala, especially in rural areas reveals that their poverty-related and socio-cultural factors influence their perception of health and their health-seeking behavior to a great extent. Socio-cultural factors which impinge on reproductive health include women's lack of awareness of health matters, strong seclusion norms which inhibit the health-seeking of adolescent girls, and unmarried women, large family norms and in difference towards family planning, encouraging frequent and closely spaced pregnancies which frequently result in maternal mortality, morbidity and delivery complications (Nair and Nair 1998, Asari and Susuman 1997, Kannanetal. 1991). Above all, their societal evaluation, which makes them the last to obtain nutritious food and health care and requiring them to take long periods of physical strain take a heavy toll on their overall health condition. Gender bias operates at several levels, from womb to tomb and restricts their availability and timely utilization of health services. Women are doubly disadvantaged in their accessibility to health care. Culturally, they are not predisposed towards caring for their own selves, and socially, they are

hampered by various taboos and obstacles that prevent them from accessing health care even when it is available. These issues make the study of the reproductive health of women a very complicated matter. Nonetheless, because of the critical importance of reproductive health to women's well-being, it has to be discussed in detail. The current focus on reproductive health marks a global recognition that reproductive health needs have been largely neglected and that the consequences of this neglect have been profound, particularly for women (BangandBang1991, Obermeyer and Potter1991, Miller 2000, Padmadas et al. 2004,).

In this article, the researcher examines the different socio-cultural factors that are significantly associated with reproductive health care behavior during ante-natal, natal and post-natal periods. The variables the researcher have identified for analysis are: determinants/components of antenatal care, place of ante natal and natal care, nature of antenatal care, delivery care and post- delivery health care. On natal care, the researcher has examined the place of delivery, type of delivery and problems related to childbirth. These are then related to the respondents' current age, age at marriage, education, occupation, income and religion. Where found relevant, the husband's socio-economic status also has been taking in to account because on most matters relating to a woman, especially on sexual matters the husband plays a critical role.

Accordingly, we have put forward; the following hypothesis for testing and verification. There is significant relationship between socio cultural background and behavior relating to reproductive health care. For testing purposes, reproductive health care has been divided into different elements and then they are related to the various socio-cultural variables.

The health care awareness of any community is dependent mainly on two factors (1) educational development, and (2) availability of health care services/facilities and medicines. As development proceeds, this is bound to increase overtime. The expansion of medical care has contributed to the

increasing health expectations of the population through improved accessibility and increasing their belief in modern medicine (Dileep and Ram, 2000). Safe motherhood is a part of an essential package of reproductive health and child health services. Death related to pregnancy and childbirth, is the most direct indicator of reproductive health care. But mortality statistics tell us only a part of the story. For every woman who dies, many more suffer from serious illnesses (Pachauri, 1998). By some estimates, better care during labor and delivery could prevent 50-80 percent of maternal deaths. If obstetric complications are handled effectively, mortality can be substantially reduced (Pachauri, 1999).

Adequate utilization of health care services during pregnancy and delivery ensures a healthy mother. This may imply how much reproductive health care a woman gets. In this the health care received by the respondents with respect to their reproductive health is discussed with respect to their anti-natal and natal care. These are examined in terms of their socio-cultural background to determine to what extent they are related. The main theoretical perspectives used in this study is Talcott Parson's Structural Functional Theory.

Methodology

The main objective of the study is to analyze the socio-cultural dimensions of reproductive health care of women in rural Kerala. The Population of the study includes all the mothers in the age group of 15-44 living in the rural areas of Kerala. From among the population, 300 mothers in the age group 15-44 were selected as a sample from three districts of Kerala based on the highest rate in (1) fertility (Malappuram), (2) maternal mortality (Kasargod) and (3) obstetric morbidity (Ernakulam). From each district, two Panchayats were randomly selected, viz. Molgralputhur and Madhur from Kasaragod, Anakkayam and Kuttulangadi from Malappuram, and Elamkunnappuzha and Mulakukadu from Ernakulam district. From each Panchayat using simple random method, 50 respondents were selected from the household list provided by

the respective Panchayats, constituting a total sample of 300 respondents. A structured interview schedule prepared based on the objective was administered to the sample. Open-ended questions were also asked to understand their views on the problem. A descriptive research design has been used in this study. The study has utilized data from both primary and secondary sources.

Analysis of Data and Results

Several background factors may influence health care during women's reproductive span. Here, the researcher relates the socio-cultural factors with their productive health care of women in the pre-natal and post-natal periods. Even though the problems we were concerned with are of a biological nature, social and cultural factors may have some influence on the occurrence and persistence of such problems. So, we looked into the socio-cultural contexts in which these problems occurred.

The appropriate timing of the antenatal care visits and regular attendance are essential for optimum benefits of health care facilities. Delayed use may reduce the effectiveness of ANC as a device to avoid pregnancy related complications. Generally, the obstetricians recommended ANC visits to be made monthly up to the 28th week, fortnightly up to the 36th week and weekly until the 40th week (NCPD, Kenya, 1999).

In the sample 61 percent of the respondent were Muslims and about 23 percent of the women were Hindus. Only 16 percent of the women are belonged to the Christian category. When the Antenatal care visits of the respondents were analyzed with their religion it was found that most of the Hindu respondents (79.1%) had undertaken monthly visits during their pregnancy period. They were closely followed by Muslims (73%). At the same time, this was only 66.7 percent in the case of Christian respondents. Frequent ANC visits enable the doctor to detect pregnancy-related problems at an early stage and can control the problem through medication. In this matter clear religious differences are perceptible.

The antenatal care of the respondents was analyzed with

their education. It was revealed that a vast majority (73.3%) of the respondents had undertaken monthly antenatal care visits while 5.7 per cent had visited health centers only during delivery time. However, when the researcher examined the data in terms of the level of education of the respondents, it was found that, there is a close relationship between the level of education and monthly visits which are the requirements for good reproductive health. The use of this facility increases progressively with the rise in educational level. Among the higher secondary, graduate and post graduate respondents the use was 100% while this was 54.5 percent among illiterates and 51.1 percent among semi literates. It was also noticed that among the respondents who had undertaken ANC visit only at the time of delivery 13.6 percent were illiterate and 13 percent were semi literates and none from the higher educated groups. From this analysis it can be concluded that as the level of education increases monthly antenatal care visits also increases. This shows that the increased level of education increases their need for undertaking anti natal care visits, which in turn increased their positive attitude towards antenatal care visits (ANC). Education in ANC is an essential element in good health practice. If pregnant women do not conduct visits to the antenatal care centers from the beginning of pregnancy, it will be difficult for the care givers to identify and keep track of the health problems and this may result in gynecological morbidity and risky delivery.

Income wise analysis showed that the majority of the respondents (85%) in the income group of Rs.5001-10,000 and 96.8 percent in the above Rs. 10,000 income group underwent monthly visits during pregnancy period while only 19.1 percentage in the low-income group of below Rs.1000 and 16.3 percentage in the Rs.100–5000 income group had visited ANC centers only after 6 months of their pregnancy. Thus, when income level is considered, it is found that high income group women visited more often and earlier than the low-income group women. In fact, as in the case of education, there is also a steady increase in case of monthly visits to PHCs as income increases.

Components of Antenatal Care (ANC)

The components of ANC during the pregnancy period include medical treatment like tetanus injection, oral supplements of iron, folic acid and vitamin tablets, awareness building through advice regarding the type of food intake as well as medical check-ups, which include checking of blood pressure, height and weight, testing of urine and blood, internal check-ups, etc.

During pregnancy period women must take two tetanus injections. She should also consume iron, folic acid and vitamin supplements throughout her pregnancy period. When the income level of the respondents was cross tabulated with the medical treatment availed during pregnancy it was found that the respondents in the income group below Rs. 1000 were found to have low intake tetanus injection (87.1%), iron supplement (78.9%), folic acid supplement (76%) and vitamin supplement (85.7%) when compared to higher income group of above 5001-10000 (97.4%, 97%, 97.1%, 97.3% respectively).

In developing countries where infectious diseases like cholera, typhoid etc., are endemic and often occur in endemic forms, it is essential to immunize against all the diseases by vaccinations if they have not already been immunized. It is most important that all pregnant women be immunized against tetanus, as neo-natal tetanus is one of the common causes of high prenatal mortality (Mudaliar and Menon,1998). Usually, pregnant women will receive two doses of tetanus toxoid. The study shows that among 98.5 percentage of the respondents had taken tetanus injection and in the case of Muslims and Christians it was 93.3% and 87.5% respectively. Iron deficiency is another risk for the young mother. Adolescents who become pregnant with in four years of menarche are physically and psychologically immature and since they are still growing, will have greater nutritional requirements than adult women. Many girls belonging to the poor socio-economic groups are already malnourished. Here it is observed that there is much religious difference in receiving tetanus injection, iron supplement, folic

acid supplement and vitamin supplement. Hindus use all of them in largest proportion, followed by Muslims and Christians. The fact that there is consistency in these on all items makes one to conclude that religion is indeed a factor in availing all these items of antenatal healthcare.

When the researcher examined the influence of education, on the essential medical checkups required by a pregnant woman during the pre-natal period found a close relationship. Periodic medical check-ups include checking of blood pressure, height, weight, testing of urine and blood and internal check-ups of the uterus which enables the doctor to detect complications if any during pregnancy and to overcome any complications that may arise at the time of delivery.

The study found that 93 percent age of the respondents had undergone medical check-ups at the time of pregnancy and it was only 7 percentage who had not. Millions of women in developing countries lack access to adequate care during pregnancy. Such care can detect and manage existing diseases, recognize and treat complications early, provide information and counseling on signs and symptoms of problems, recommend where to seek treatment complications arise and help women and their families prepare for child birth. It may be pointed out that during pregnancy, any woman can develop serious, life-threatening complications that require medical care. Because there is no reliable way to predict which women will develop these complications, it is essential that all pregnant women should have access to high quality obstetric care throughout their pregnancies and especially after child birth when most emergency complication arise. It is with this objective that the Government is providing these facilities through the PHCs.

Socio-cultural Factors and Place of Antenatal Care

Since our society is religious and tradition-bound religious diversity may influence in receiving pregnancy care. The religious beliefs such as babies are given by God, may lead them not to avail the ANC facilities, since they think it is also the responsibility of the Almighty, to take care of them. In our

sample a large number of the respondents had approached private clinics (51.7%) for pregnancy care, 39.7 percent of the respondent had approached mother and child hospital for pregnancy care and only 7.3 percent of the respondent had approached primary health center (PHC) for pregnancy care. Age wise analysis showed that majority of the respondents in the age group of 25–29 (74.5%) and 30–34 (61.7%) approached private clinics, while majority of the young age group (66.7%) approached mother and child hospitals for their ANC.

In private hospitals better facilities are available and the middle age group category who expected complications during delivery preferred private hospitals even though they are expensive. In the rural areas the private hospitals are small clinics with better facilities and comparatively less expensive when compared to urban private hospitals. The researcher assumed that this phenomenon of preference given to private health care centers by the respondents in their reproductive care may be because of their better educational level.

Income-wise analysis of the data also shows that the highest income group of respondents approached private hospitals for pregnancy care (90.3%) while in the lower income groups 56.4 percent approached mother and child hospitals run by the State Government for receiving ANC. There is a clear income differential seen in choosing the place of antenatal care. The place of antenatal care received by the respondents showed much difference between the lowest and highest income groups of respondents also.

Antenatal care of the respondent and religion wise analysis found that among the Hindus, majority (55.2%) of the respondents approach state run mother and child hospital while majority of the Muslims (57.8%) approached private clinic for getting ANC. It is also noticed that while 43.8% of the Christian respondents approached private clinics an equal number of them approached mother and Child hospitals as well. We can conclude from the data that there is relationship between religion and the place of antenatal care

Socio-Cultural Factors in Natal Care

An important component of health care services of mothers and babies is the provision of proper medical care at the time of delivery. This will reduce the risk of complications and infections, that can seriously affect the health of the mother and the newborn. The major factors that determine natal health includes the place of delivery, type of delivery and the type of care received by the respondents while in hospital. Institutional delivery in the presence of trained medical practitioners is considered to be the best mode of child birth, as far as the post-natal care of the respondent is concerned. Hence the place of delivery of the respondents was analyzed to find out the factors in post-natal health of the respondents.

The data shows that 44.7 per cent of the child births had taken place in private hospitals, 41 percent in Government hospitals, 8.3 per cent at home and 6 per cent at primary health centers. Respondents who preferred home to hospital gave reasons such as kin support, familiarity, tradition as well as their feeling that birth is a normal phenomenon that does not need an institutional setting.

Type of delivery plays an important role as far as reproductive health of mother is concerned. In this study vast majority (86%) of the respondents had normal delivery, whereas only 13.7 percent of the deliveries were caesarian.

Age and Place of delivery wise analysis found that, the respondents in the 35-39 age group category (43.9%) and 40-44 (59.3%) preferred govt. hospitals for delivering their children. The proportion of home deliveries at home is highest for higher age group of above 45 years (58.3%). This is because at the time of their last delivery, home deliveries were more common than at later times.

The very young age group and older age group who are considered to be the risk category preferred govt. Hospitals, because govt. hospitals with experienced and highly qualified doctors and nurses were assumed to be more capable of handling delivery complications than private hospitals.

The percentage distribution of respondents by place of delivery and age at marriage found that a varying trend is seen with age at marriage and institutional deliveries (both Government and Private hospitals).

Proportion of home deliveries are decreased with increase in age at marriage. So higher age at marriage had influenced women to prefer institutional deliveries. This is quite in conformity with those belonging to older generation had indicated that they were mostly delivered at home when home delivery was common. When it comes to age at the time of delivery, we find that those who were married at or after age 25 preferred private hospitals because they anticipated their delivery to be complicated and preferred private hospitals (75%) where they expected more careful attention to delivery cases. Also, among those who were married at or before 15 years of age 30.6 percentage had home deliveries because they expected their deliveries to be normal.

Education of respondents has been found to play a major in their preference for place of delivery. The place of delivery and education wise analysis showed that while majority (59.1%) of the illiterate delivered their child at home, all the graduate and post graduate respondents (100% each) preferred private hospitals. 84.2% of the higher secondary educated women also had their delivery in private hospitals. It is also noticed that, a large section of the semi-literate (48.9%) and high school educated (42.1%) preferred govt. hospitals. This may be due to the fact that as the educational level increases their economic level also increases. So, they can afford private hospitals for delivery. It can be said that women's education has a positive influence in choosing the place of delivery as the level of education increases, preference for institutional delivery also increases.

Since our society is male dominated, most of the decisions in the family are taken by the husband. So, it is relevant to examine the husband's educational attainment, along with the wife's education, which may influence the choice of the

place of delivery of their wives. Hence the education of husband and the place of delivery were analyzed. The analysis brought to light the fact that the husbands who were illiterate and semi-illiterate the delivery of their wives had taken place at govt. hospitals (60% and 46.6% respectively). It was also noticed that among the illiterate husbands, 40 percent of the wife's delivery had taken place at home. It is clear from the table that as the education of husbands increased those who prefer institutional deliveries also increased. Selection of private hospitals for the delivery of their wives was found more among the husbands whose educational qualifications were high. These results may be due to there as on that, generally higher educated husbands usually occupy higher socio-economic status in the society and this led them to prefer private hospitals as they could afford the comparatively higher cost. Analysis of type of occupation and the place of delivery revealed that respondents employed in white collar and professional occupations (84.6%, and 100% respectively) preferred private hospitals than govt. hospitals.

When the place of delivery was analyzed on the basis of their religion it was found that delivery of babies at home were more among Muslims (12.4%) when compared to Christians (4.2%). None of the Hindus had delivery at home. Among the Hindus 56.7 percent approached govt. hospitals while 50 percent of the Christians approached govt. hospitals. This analysis brought to light the fact that among the respondents who had delivered their child at home a vast majority belong to the Muslim community (92%) which shows their low awareness regarding maternity and child health.

The income wise analysis showed that as income increases preference for private hospitals also increases. This may be due to the better infrastructure facility available at private hospitals which can be afforded by the high-income group. Generally higher income groups usually occupy higher socio-economic status in the society and this leads them to prefer private institutions for delivery of children.

The place of delivery and type of delivery wise analysis

showed that private hospitals showed the highest percentage of caesarian delivery (61.9%) whereas the corresponding percentage for government hospitals is 38.1 percent. This illustrates the higher chance of caesarian deliveries in private hospitals. Also, this result supports the findings of another study conducted in Kerala using NFHS data where the same trend was noticed (Padmadas, 2000). This high proportion of caesarean deliveries in private hospitals could be due to economic benefit to the hospital and to avoid possible complications during delivery. When the type of delivery and health problems associated with child birth brought to light the fact that vast majority of the respondents (72%) who had health problems during pregnancy had undergone caesarian type delivery and 61.5% of the respondents who had undergone caesarian type deliveries had health problems after delivery.

The gynecological morbidity and type of delivery wise analysis revealed respondents who had undergone caesarean deliveries reported more gynecological problems (73%) compared to those who had normal deliveries (52.8 %). Almost all the respondents had taken health-improving treatments after delivery which included Ayurvedic and Allopathic medicines.

There is a general belief that type of delivery has much effect on the health problems of a woman, especially as far as caesarian section delivery is concerned. The reason behind such a belief is that normal delivery is a natural process and it is not harmful to the body. But caesarian section delivery is artificially done and this may have some impact on the health of the mother.

Health Care after Delivery

In Kerala after delivery, there are mainly three forms of post-natal care such as traditional, Ayurvedic and Allopathic. The study revealed that 94.3 percent of respondents had undergone one or the other form of post-natal care. When the duration of this care was analyzed, it was found that 52.7 percent of respondents had undergone health treatment only for one month, while 41.3 percent had undergone health treatment for three months. The health treatment included allopathic and

Ayurvedic medicines, special diet, food, oil massage, completes body rest etc. For majority of the respondents this care was provided by their mothers (71.3%). A vast majority of the respondents (96%) used both Ayurvedic and Allopathic health improving medicines.

Conclusion

In this article, the researcher examines the socio-cultural dimensions of reproductive health care in rural Kerala through the following variables: determinants, components, and place of antenatal care; antenatal medical checkups; place and type of delivery; health problems associated with childbirth; type of delivery and morbidity; and postnatal health care. Findings from the study, indicates that there is a close relationship between socio-cultural variables and reproductive health variables at the pre-natal, natal and post-natal stages. Each of these relationships has been clearly demonstrated in the analysis of data and result section. The above analysis showed that, the socio-economic and cultural variables like age, education, income and religion play a significant role in determining the attitude towards pregnancy check-ups, selection of ANC centers, treatment availed during pregnancy period, place of their delivery and health care at home after delivery. Furthermore, the study highlighted the association between the place of delivery and type of delivery, type of delivery and health problems as well as gynecological morbidity and type of delivery.

The study is primarily guided by Talcott Parson's Structural Functional Theory. Understanding the study within the Structural functional theoretical framework of Parsons reveals that, reproductive health care of rural women in Kerala is a part of the larger social system wherein family, health care institutions, cultural norms and gender roles functions together to maintain social stability.

Kerala is a state with comparatively higher Human Development Indices in India. The state has got international recognition for the high educational and health status of women. However, the findings of the study reveal that socio-cultural

factors significantly influence the reproductive health care of women in rural Kerala. The study emphasizes the constant need for proper awareness among women regarding reproductive health care practices, so that socio-cultural factors do not become a barrier to accessing them. Ensuring women's health and status is not only vital for their well-being but also constitutes a futuristic step towards nurturing a healthy generation.

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**Unveiling the Nexus: Exploring Sex Education in India's
Digital Landscape**

Nihal N.*

Abstract

In India, sex education remains a controversial and often neglected topic, despite its foundational role in shaping informed, healthy individuals. Deep-rooted social taboos, cultural silence, and policy gaps hinder comprehensive educational frameworks. This article explores the contemporary challenges of implementing sex education in India, particularly in a digitally saturated context where adolescents increasingly rely on the internet for information. Through a sociological lens, supported by the PESTLE framework and Foucault's discourse on power and sexuality, the paper critically analyzes the social, political, and digital intersections shaping sex education. The study emphasizes the need for rights-based, inclusive approaches that embrace technology while protecting youth from misinformation and digital harm. Recommendations include curriculum reform, digital literacy, educator training, and policy shifts to foster a safe, informed, and empowered adolescent generation.

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Unveiling the Nexus: Exploring Sex Education in India's Digital Landscape

In India, open discussions about sex and sexuality remain largely absent from both public and private spaces. This reluctance is deeply embedded in centuries-old cultural and social norms, where modesty and silence are often associated with virtue (Alexander et al., 2016). Unlike many Western societies where conversations about puberty, identity, and relationships are encouraged from an early age, Indian families tend to avoid these topics altogether (UNESCO, 2018). As a result, adolescents are left to navigate complex physical and emotional changes with little to no guidance from the adults around them.

The transition into adolescence is a critical stage of self-awareness and identity formation. During this period, young people need access to accurate, age-appropriate information about their bodies, emotions, relationships, and rights (UNFPA, 2014). However, the absence of open dialogue at home creates a vacuum of knowledge, leaving many teenagers confused, misinformed, or fearful about their natural experiences (Chakraborty et al., 2011). In this context, the responsibility to provide reliable and inclusive sex education falls to educational institutions and community-based initiatives (Puri & Cleland, 2006).

Across India, several organizations and individuals have recognized sex education as a vital component of youth development and public health. They advocate for curriculum reforms that include not just biology, but also discussions about consent, mental well-being, sexual orientation, and healthy relationships (UNESCO, 2018). The aim is not to promote permissiveness, but to empower young people with the knowledge they need to make informed and respectful choices.

India is home to the largest adolescent population in the world, and with nearly one-fifth of the global adolescent demographic residing in the country, the urgency for reform is

evident (UNICEF, 2019). Inadequate sex education and persistent cultural taboos have led many teenagers to seek answers from unreliable sources, such as unregulated websites, social media, and peer gossip (Jejeebhoy et al., 2015). This reliance on informal and often misleading content can contribute to harmful practices, increase the risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and perpetuate gender-based violence (Chandra-Mouli et al., 2015).

Recent data highlight the consequences of this silence. A significant percentage of new HIV infections in India occur among young people aged 15 to 24 (National AIDS Control Organisation [NACO], 2022). At the same time, surveys reveal that most male and females receive little or no formal education about sexuality from their parents or teachers (Puri et al., 2007). This gap places them at risk, not only physically but emotionally and socially, as they grow into adulthood.

This paper seeks to examine the landscape of sex education in India, particularly in the digital era where information is abundant but not always accurate. It explores the contemporary challenges of implementing sex education in India, particularly in a digitally saturated context where adolescents increasingly turn to digital platforms for information. It argues for a comprehensive, culturally sensitive approach that equips adolescents with the tools to understand themselves and others with confidence, care, and critical thinking.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, incorporating both primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews and informal discussions with college students aged 18–24 from various educational institutions in Kerala. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to reflect diverse gender identities, socio-economic backgrounds, and digital access. Ethical consent was obtained, and anonymity was maintained throughout.

Secondary sources—including academic literature, policy documents, and media reports—were used to contextualize the

findings and support comparative analysis. Thematic coding was employed to analyze patterns in attitudes, access to sex education, and online information-seeking behavior (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The study draws on Foucault's concept of power and discourse to explore how sexuality is socially regulated and silenced (Foucault, 1978).

PESTLE Analysis: Structural Barriers to Sex Education in India

A multi-dimensional framework helps explain why sex education in India remains stalled:

- **Political:** Sex education initiatives often face conservative backlash. Programs like the Adolescent Education Programme (2006) were halted for being “immoral” (Gabler, 2011). As Foucault (1978) argues, political institutions maintain power by controlling discourse—including what youth are allowed to learn.
- **Economic:** Educating youth on reproductive health leads to lower fertility rates, fewer unwanted pregnancies, and increased workforce participation among women (World Health Organization, 2017). Ignoring this has long-term economic consequences, including reduced productivity and higher public health costs.
- **Social:** Cultural silence reinforces ignorance. Discussing menstruation or contraception remains taboo, especially for women (Apte, 2019). Foucault's “repressive hypothesis” describes how societies regulate sex not by liberating it, but by avoiding it (Foucault, 1978).
- **Technological:** Youth turn to YouTube, Instagram, and even pornography for answers. Bandura's Social Learning Theory suggests that repeated exposure to certain behaviors can shape norms and attitudes (Bandura, 2001). Without critical media literacy, adolescents may adopt dangerous or unrealistic beliefs.

- Legal: Laws surrounding sexting and consent are ambiguous. Consensual acts among minors are often criminalized, while education on legal rights and responsibilities remains minimal (UNESCO, 2018).

Findings and Discussion

The Current State of Sex Education in Indian Schools: Challenges and Possibilities

Despite growing recognition of the importance of sexuality education, its implementation in India remains inconsistent and inadequate (UNESCO, 2018). Schools often restrict the conversation to limited subjects typically menstruation or reproductive biology leaving out crucial dimensions such as consent, identity, emotional well-being, or mental health (Apte, 2019).

One significant barrier is the persistent cultural discomfort around discussing sexuality in educational spaces (Tiwari, 2020). Lessons, when they occur, are often delivered in a clinical or moralistic tone, detached from the realities of adolescent experience. The practice of separating students by gender during these sessions reinforces existing stereotypes and limits open dialogue (Gabler, 2011). Such approaches not only alienate students but also perpetuate misinformation and silence. As one 20-year-old female undergraduate noted during an interview, “In our school, sex education was just a single class on menstruation for girls and hygiene for boys — nothing about relationships or consent.”

Resistance from parents, educators, and policymakers is often grounded in the belief that such education may corrupt moral values (Chandra-Mouli et al., 2015). However, research from both Indian and global contexts consistently shows that age-appropriate, scientifically accurate sex education encourages delayed sexual activity, improves decision-making, and enhances respect in relationships (UNESCO, 2018; Kirby & Laris, 2009). Disparities in access further complicate the situation. While private and urban schools may offer limited modules, government and rural schools

often lack trained personnel or supportive infrastructure (Singh et al., 2021). Girls, students from marginalized communities, and children with disabilities face even greater barriers in accessing information and support (UNICEF, 2020).

Existing curricular frameworks rarely address essential topics such as contraception, gender diversity, emotional intimacy, or HIV prevention (UNESCO, 2018). The absence of this knowledge leaves students vulnerable—not only to physical health risks, but also to emotional harm, social stigma, and exploitation.

How Does the Youth Educate Itself?

In the absence of consistent and reliable sex education in schools and homes, many Indian adolescents turn to informal sources to learn about sexuality, relationships, and identity. While these channels can fill critical knowledge gaps, they also carry the risk of spreading misinformation (UNESCO, 2018).

1. Social Media

Platforms such as Instagram and YouTube have become key spaces for adolescents to explore topics like sexual health, identity, and consent (Adebayo et al., 2020). Their accessibility and anonymity make them appealing, but unregulated content often spreads inaccuracies. Strengthening digital literacy can help young people assess online information critically. As one 19-year-old male student explained, “Most of what I know came from Instagram reels and YouTube videos, but I’m never fully sure if it’s correct.”

2. Pornography

For many adolescents, pornography becomes a default source of sexual information when formal education is absent (Flood, 2009). While it exposes viewers to certain sexual themes, it often presents unrealistic, gendered, or violent depictions of intimacy. Without proper context, these portrayals may distort understandings of relationships and consent. A 20-year-old respondent recalled, “I started watching porn in school because no

one would answer my questions about sex. It gave me ideas, but later I realized much of it isn't how real relationships work.”

3. Television and OTT Content

Streaming platforms now feature more open portrayals of adolescence, sexuality, and mental health (Collins et al., 2017). While these can offer valuable insights, dramatized depictions may set unrealistic expectations. A 21-year-old female student reflected, “Shows like Sex Education taught me things I never learned in school, but sometimes it feels too ideal compared to real life.” Media literacy programs can equip young audiences to critically interpret such portrayals.

4. Books and Literature

Books—particularly young adult fiction and self-help guides, provide another avenue for understanding puberty, identity, and relationships (Hansen, 2012). Educators and parents can help youth select factual, age-appropriate materials. An 18-year-old respondent shared, “Reading novels about teenagers helped me understand feelings and relationships better than any class did.”

5. Peer Education and Support

Peer-led programs, often facilitated by NGOs or schools, create safe spaces for dialogue, reduce stigma, and promote informed decision-making (Bode et al., 2021). A 22-year-old campus peer-support club member remarked, “It’s easier to ask friends than teachers because you don’t feel judged.”

Young people’s sexual learning comes from multiple informal sources, each with strengths and weaknesses. Encouraging critical engagement, safe peer discussion, and guided access to reliable resources can ensure that adolescents develop informed, respectful, and healthy approaches to sexuality (WHO, 2021).

Online Intimacy and Digital Safety among Adolescents

Adolescence is a crucial period for emotional and sexual development, and in recent years, digital platforms have become central spaces where young people explore intimacy—particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, when in-person interactions were

limited (UNICEF, 2021). This shift has contributed to an increase in online sexual behaviors, including sexting (Mitchell et al., 2014).

For many adolescents, the appeal of digital intimacy lies in the privacy and freedom these platforms provide. Sexting, for instance, can function as a means of self-expression and validation (Lenhart, 2015). A 19-year-old female student reflected, “During lockdown, chatting online felt like the only way to feel close to someone. It was easier to share feelings there than in person.” However, these practices also carry substantial risks. Shared images may be leaked or misused, resulting in cyberbullying, emotional distress, and exploitation (Livingstone & Smith, 2014). A 20-year-old male respondent disclosed, “I trusted someone online, but later the screenshots were used to threaten me. It was scary and made me stop talking to strangers.” The anonymity of online spaces can further expose youth to predatory behaviors (Marwick & boyd, 2014). To safeguard adolescents, digital safety education must address consent, privacy, and personal boundaries in online interactions. Legal awareness is equally critical, as sexting among minors can carry severe consequences under child protection laws in India (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2021). As one 21-year-old participant noted, “Most of us don't even know that sending explicit photos can be a criminal offence.”

Comprehensive sex education should therefore integrate modules on digital behavior, equipping students to recognize risks, seek help when needed, and make informed choices (UNESCO, 2018). This should be complemented by stronger cybercrime enforcement and youth-friendly reporting systems to protect minors from online harm.

Addressing Stigma around Contraception and STIs

Sexual health in India continues to be shaped by stigma and silence, particularly regarding contraception and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (Chandra-Mouli et al., 2014). Despite increasing sexual activity among youth, conversations about safety, prevention, and reproductive rights are often avoided—resulting in

high rates of unplanned pregnancies and unsafe abortions (Jejeebhoy et al., 2015).

One 20-year-old female respondent shared, “When I asked my mother about birth control, she told me it’s not something to think about before marriage. It made me feel embarrassed to ask again.” This reflects broader gender norms, where women disproportionately bear the responsibility for contraception, often with limited knowledge or access. Social beliefs and traditional gender roles frequently discourage male participation in contraceptive use (Guttmacher Institute, 2020). Misconceptions—such as fears about infertility or reduced sexual pleasure—further hinder effective uptake.

A 21-year-old male respondent admitted, “I always thought contraception was mainly the girl’s responsibility. No one explained that it should be shared.” Young people often rely on myths or fragmented information, leading to poor health outcomes and emotional stress. As one 19-year-old student revealed, “We learnt a bit about HIV in school, but I had no idea there were other STIs. I found out only from the internet.”

Addressing these gaps requires a move away from abstinence-only messages towards open, inclusive education that emphasizes safety, consent, and shared responsibility (WHO, 2021). Public investment in comprehensive sex education, alongside free and confidential access to contraceptives, can empower adolescents—particularly girls—to make informed autonomous decisions about their health and futures.

Current Policies on Sex Education in India

In India, the development of sex education policy remains shaped by cultural and religious sensitivities (Puri & Cleland, 2006). Widespread misconceptions continue to fuel resistance, with some stakeholders expressing concern that sex education may encourage promiscuity (Barman, 2013). Nonetheless, the rising incidence of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) prompted a limited governmental response (National AIDS Control Organisation [NACO], 2020).

The Adolescent Education Programme (AEP), launched in 2006 by the Ministry of Human Resource Development in collaboration with NACO, was intended to provide sexuality education alongside life skills and awareness on issues like substance abuse (MHRD, 2006). However, controversy over its graphic content led to criticism and even state-level bans (Pattanaik, 2007). As a result, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have stepped in to bridge gaps through workshops, helplines, and peer education programs (UNESCO, 2018).

Some educational institutions have invited trained professionals to deliver lectures on sexual health, but nationwide implementation remains inconsistent (Chandra-Mouli et al., 2014). In contrast, countries such as the Netherlands, France, and Australia offer well-established models of comprehensive sex education that prioritize early, inclusive, and age-appropriate instruction, covering consent, sexual orientation, disease prevention, and emotional well-being—supported by trained educators and strong governmental backing (Ketting et al., 2015).

Recommendations

To strengthen sex education in India, the following steps are proposed:

- **Curriculum Reform:** Integrate age-appropriate, inclusive topics into school syllabi, including consent, contraception, STIs, and gender diversity.
- **NGO Engagement:** Encourage collaborations between schools and NGOs to conduct sessions, events, and student-led clubs focused on sexual health education.
- **Professional Training:** Equip teachers and health professionals with the tools to communicate effectively and sensitively about sexuality across diverse settings.
- **Regular Workshops:** Introduce ongoing sessions in schools and communities to foster continued learning and safe discussion spaces.

- **Digital Outreach:** Leverage technology and social media to spread accurate, youth-friendly information about sexual and reproductive health.
- **Global Best Practices:** Adapt proven frameworks from countries with successful programs while ensuring alignment with India's socio-cultural context.
- **Early Introduction:** Begin discussions on health and relationships at a young age, gradually expanding content in line with cognitive and emotional development.

Conclusion

A multi-pronged approach involving government, educators, civil society, and digital platforms is essential to ensure young people in India receive the knowledge and support necessary to make informed decisions about their sexual health and well-being (UNESCO, 2018).

India still faces entrenched structural and cultural barriers in implementing comprehensive sex education. Increasing reliance on digital platforms underscores the inadequacy of current school-based programs, leaving many adolescents to depend on unverified online sources (UNICEF, 2021). Without reliable, age-appropriate information, young people risk developing misconceptions about relationships, consent, and reproductive health.

Educational institutions must move beyond minimal compliance to actively create safe, inclusive learning spaces. Comprehensive sex education is not merely an academic subject—it is a public health imperative and a pathway to empowering adolescents to understand their rights, navigate emotional growth, and make informed life decisions (WHO, 2021). However, practical challenges persist. Resistance from conservative groups, lack of political consensus and inadequate teacher training continue to delay meaningful change (Jejeebhoy et al., 2015). Future research should examine pilot programs, NGO-led initiatives, and digital interventions to determine the most effective strategies in India's diverse socio-cultural settings.

Drawing on Foucault's (1978) concept of power and discourse, it becomes evident that sex education in India is not solely about imparting biological facts but also about challenging entrenched systems that regulate what can be said, whose experiences are acknowledged, and which forms of knowledge are legitimized. Transforming the discourse on sexuality into one that is inclusive, respectful, and empowering can enable sex education to serve as both a tool for personal development and a catalyst for broader social change. Ultimately, by prioritizing comprehensive, culturally responsive sex education, India can equip its youth to lead informed, confident, and healthy lives—both online and offline.

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Book Review

Being Single in India: Stories of Gender, Exclusion, and Possibility

Lamb, S. (2022). *Being single in India: Stories of gender, exclusion and possibility*. University of California Press.

The book "Being Single in India: Stories of Gender, Exclusion, and Possibility" by Sarah Lamb challenges our understanding of a largely overlooked demographic: unmarried women in India. Sarah Lamb, in a thought-provoking and analytical manner, delves into the hardships faced by unmarried women in West Bengal, India, shedding light on the societal mechanisms that isolate them even as they strive to carve out their own identities. Through her work, Lamb explores the lives of unmarried women in the context of family, education, employment, caregiving, love, sexuality, motherhood, pleasure, and friendships, encompassing various social strata in Bengal, ranging from the affluent elite to the middle class to the economically disadvantaged.

The journey into the lives of single women in India begins with a fundamental question: "Why are you single?" This question sets the stage for Lamb's comprehensive study, marking it as a significant academic exploration of singlehood in India. In a country where living independently outside the traditional framework of family ties is uncommon, the study of Singles Studies is an emerging discipline. As an anthropologist, Lamb predominantly examines singlehood through the lens of

kinship, maintaining a delicate balance between analysing the challenges faced by unmarried women and exploring the opportunities that this unconventional path can offer.

Lamb examines the everyday experiences of never-married women through an intersectional lens, categorising them into two distinct groups. The first group consists of women who reside in urban areas, have received cosmopolitan education, and benefit from relative freedom due to their social class. They can portray their singleness as a "choice" in this context. The second group comprises women who are constrained by their social class and caste backgrounds. Their singlehood is primarily a result of structural factors such as poverty, obligations to their families of origin, and disparities in social class. The real-life experiences of these women highlight a range of gender-related implications, not only in terms of the relationships between men and women, but also in the distinctions between married and unmarried women.

Lamb skillfully presents rich histories and narratives of women's lives in her work based on extensive conversations and fieldwork spanning seven years. Instead of the term 'participant observation,' commonly used by anthropologists, she favours the phrase 'hanging out' (pp. 15) to describe her approach. Through this method, she delves into the formation of deep friendships, ensuring ongoing support and adaptability in her research. She employs face-to-face open-ended interviews to document approximately fifty four case studies of women, challenging the conventional concept of what it means to "be single." By featuring the stories of never-married women spanning from the age of thirty five to ninety two, Lamb provides a compelling and diverse portrayal of a lifestyle shared by women from various social classes and castes. These women include urban professionals, rural day labourers, heterosexual and lesbian individuals, as well as those who have avoided marriage by choice or due to their life circumstances. It is important to note that the seventy percent of her interviewees did not intentionally choose to remain unmarried. In both scenarios—whether someone opts for singlehood or ends up single due to

circumstances—their situations are influenced by a complex interplay of socio-cultural and socio-economic factors.

The book comprises seven chapters that explore various aspects of the lives of single women. The first section offers a critical analysis of a society that is characterised by a gendered emphasis on marriage, highlighting how patriarchy exerts control over women's sexuality and desires within the context of heterosexual marriage. The subsequent section of the book underscores the intricate ways in which education and employment have become crucial pillars supporting the status of never-married women in society. Lamb's discussion on what renders a woman ineligible for marriage remains highly relevant, especially in the context of popular shows like “Indian Matchmaking” (2020). These factors encompass various aspects, such as physical appearance, disabilities, high achievements, and advanced education. Lamb highlights the phenomenon of highly educated women, including those with Ph.D. degrees, remaining unmarried. Intriguingly, being overly educated or earning significantly more than one's social class can also pose distinct challenges. Factors like affluence, feminism, technological communication advancements, and urbanisation have previously been identified as contributing to the global increase in singlehood, and Lamb's research suggests that education should be added to this list.

In Chapter Three titled ‘A Daughter’s and Sister’s Care’, Lamb explores the concept of the politics of care and its significant role in the lives of single women. She focuses on a specific type of single woman that is culturally specific to South Asia – those who remain unmarried because their families rely on their income and caregiving. These women, who carry out this particular act of “sacrifice,” often take pride and find fulfillment in their role. However, their families tend to view them primarily as breadwinners. An illustrative example of such single women can be found in the lead female character Nita, as depicted in Ritwik Ghatak's 1960 film, ‘Meghe Dhaka Tara.’ In Chapter Four, titled ‘Who Will Care for Me?’ Lamb examines

the transformation of old-age homes, which were once stigmatised places, into desirable and aspirational options, particularly for single women. Unmarried women in these old-age homes are valued for their presence, while married women are often viewed with sympathy and confusion, as people wonder why their children haven't taken care of them. Additionally, Lamb discusses the concept of "independent forms of sustaining self-care," (pp. 92- 93) which encompasses daily exercises, proper hydration, yoga, meditation, solitary retreats, the preparation of healthy meals, and maintaining physical fitness through activities like swimming, workouts, and walking.

The most interesting portions of the book come towards the end, challenging negative narratives about single individuals. In these sections, Lamb shares stories of single women embracing fun and enjoyment, which may include going out alone, decorating their homes, and spending time with friends, all while navigating public spaces as independent single women. Lamb explains that the choice to remain single is often linked to a cosmopolitan upbringing and education. She poses the question to cosmopolitan married women: "Why have you not considered being single?"

Lamb's exploration of never-married women encompasses individuals who have not entered into marriage, including those who identify as queer and people engaged in romantic and sexual relationships. In this context, "being single" (pp. 25) specifically refers to not having gone through the act of marriage, rather than describing one's broader relationship status. Taking it forward, Lamb offers valuable insights into what could be seen as a "Plan B," a choice available to independent women who decide not to pursue marriage. The author effectively highlights the societal expectations related to childbearing that are placed upon women and the repercussions of opting for non-traditional methods. This book serves as a gateway to seeing beyond what Pierre Bourdieu (1977) termed as "Doxa"— the world of tradition experienced as a 'natural world' that is often taken for granted. This includes the

deconstruction of the concept of “choice” and a critical examination of the dominant institution of marriage.

Lamb emphasises that the issue lies not in the concept of marital status itself but in the institution of marriage. Within the patriarchal framework of marriage, women are often reduced to mere vessels for reproduction and perpetuation of societal norms, traditions, and customs. Consequently, married women are marginalised as non-subjects, with their primary role being seen as reproductive. In her effort to shift the focus away from the emphasis on women's marital status, Lamb asserts that a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by single individuals requires giving prominence to the voices and experiences of those who exist outside the compulsory heterosexual and patrilineal paradigms. By framing singlehood as inherently queer, Lamb contributes significantly to challenging the exaggerated importance placed on marriage in society.

The book argues that never-married women serve as illuminating figures who shed light on the broader socio-cultural values of their society. Through their experiences, Lamb offers a fresh and thought-provoking perspective on the prevailing systems related to gender, sexuality, kinship, freedom, and social inclusion in contemporary India. Throughout her work, she challenges the conventional notion, that the sole path for women to attain kinship ties and social and economic security is through marriage, which entails socially sanctioned sexual relationships. She emphasises that single women are not the issue under scrutiny; rather, it is marriage and the confinement it often imposes on women's lives that she aims to address through the lenses of women's studies, queer studies, and gerontology.

Throughout her fieldwork, Lamb was consistently accompanied by her research assistants, whom she considers to be invaluable in facilitating informal conversations in Bengali. Importantly, these assistants played a crucial role in helping Lamb preserve the subtle linguistic nuances and cultural

references, even during translation. As the book unfolds and we delve into the lived experiences of these women, the narrative focuses primarily on their social class, with less emphasis on their caste positioning. Lamb, being an outsider to the complex caste system in India, openly acknowledges her limitations in fully grasping it, as an insider might.

While the book's title, "Being Single in India," might suggest that the study encompasses women from across the entire country, it's important to note that Sarah Lamb conducted extensive ethnographic research primarily in parts of West Bengal. Consequently, it would be misleading to generalise the experiences of Bengali women to represent all single women in India. While the author made an effort to balance her selection of participants, it did not necessarily constitute a fully representative sample of the entire spectrum of single women in India, as she initially suggested.

The book represents a valuable contribution to the realm of single studies as it critically examines the institution of "marriage." It serves as an insightful entry point into the field of feminist inquiry. While the author does touch upon the legal challenges that single women encounter concerning adoption, housing, and caregiving, there could have been a more comprehensive exploration of the specific legal intricacies that hinder women from leading a trouble-free life. Throughout the course of her book, Lamb explores the potential for women in India to construct lives that exist outside the institution of marriage, despite the considerable challenges they face in doing so. In summary, this book holds significant importance for researchers in the domains of gender studies, sexuality studies, single studies, and critical feminist inquiry. It provides a platform to investigate both the macro and micro-level factors that impact the lives of single women, making it a valuable resource for further exploration and analysis in these areas.

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Book Review

In Defence of the Ordinary: Everyday Awakenings

Pathak, D. N. (2021). *In defence of the ordinary: Everyday awakenings*. Bloomsbury.

The book, as the title suggests, is an exploration of ‘the ordinary’ in a world that celebrates the extraordinary. Though written by a sociologist, a claim has been made right in the beginning that it is not an academic work, at least, not in the conventional sense. However, a strict categorisation of academic and non-academic may not be the right way to approach this book, as the arguments raised reveal. The book is a collection of essays, reflective in nature and drawing from the author’s own experiences, especially his relationship with his personhood, profession and culture. And the main aim of the book is to prod the reader to explore the idea of ordinariness in themselves and their relationship with the world. The book does not attempt to divide experiences into ordinary and otherwise. Rather, it explores the various levels of ordinariness through which one navigates life. The essays of the book proceed as a free-flowing response to the idea of ordinary. Unlike strictly academic work centred on research questions that proceeds with a regimental clarity and precision, the contents of this book are best described as a kind of wandering. The author is letting himself engage in a dialogue with himself and allowing us, the reader, to be privy to it.

As detailed in the book, ordinary is the hinge, of people and relationships, that forms one’s core. As one goes in depth into the book, ordinary life is revealed as the organic relationship that one has with themselves, other people and the various elements of the

world. It is the author's argument that the world (specifically, statist and technocratic contemporary world) detests the idea of ordinary. His argument of the control exerted by the technocratic world on the individual is similar to the one raised by Marcuse (1991), where he contends that the regimes with their vested interests, manipulate needs, resulting in individuals' flawed understanding of needs as self-generated. This consequently serves in preserving the system.

The author toys with the idea of hierarchization throughout the book. In the chapter 'Anger, Love and Intersections: A Scheme of Ordinary Emotions' (Pathak, 2021, pp. 40-50), the author looks at the idea of emotions. Emotions, the author contends, are not felt in neat binaries. One is seldom only angry or only in love. Anger can have shades of concern or pity; Love may be coloured by doubt, perceived taboos or a sense of alienation. However, different institutions have somehow impressed on us that only the unadulterated emotions devoid of 'adulterants' is extraordinary and hence valid. In real, ordinary life, this is seldom the case. Added to this is the perceived hierarchy of emotions that we are made to believe in. It is 'allowed' to express some emotions, but not others. We are (generally) allowed to be happy. But society does not react to expressions of grief with similar ease. Anger and doubt are to be reined in and shoved inside our most private insides, guarded by shame. All these regimented rules disrupt our ordinary ways of feeling and release.

A similar disruption of our ordinariness is examined with reference to abuses. In the chapter 'Jokes, Abuse, Friends, Enemies and Something called In-laws' (Pathak, 2021, pp. 60-69), the author observes a rupture in the organic relationship with reference to abuses. He traces a practice of making 'inappropriate' jokes between in-laws which was familiar and prevalent in the author's cultural space while growing up. This, along with many such relationships that were hospitable to abuses rather than acting as deterrents, strengthened bonds. This relationship with abuses even extended to ones with gods, which was marked by a kind of playfulness. However, with passage of time, perceptions of abuses have turned monolithic, as weapons intended only to hurt and offend. The author says that a "deadening silence and opaqueness [may be] desirable for

sanitised political correctness, but not so for the cultural canvas of relationships.” (Pathak, 2021, p.65)

These are just a few of the instances where the author looks at disruptions to ordinariness. In each of the cases, the author defends why it is necessary to defend ordinariness against the ‘regimes of oppression’. However, the author shies away from romanticising the ordinary. Being ordinary is not merely to be instinctual. Nor are instincts to be suppressed. The instincts are to be acted on in the fairest possible manner. He says, “we are indeed not sexually obsessed, instinctually frustrated, bull-like creatures without any sense of commitment to values, aesthetics, ethics and care. Nor are we those idealised humans, ready to join the pantheon of gods in the temple called family, worshipping the singular sun alone. We are instinctually ordinary, fallible. Hence, we are ready to get attracted to various humans we come across, able to flirt, romance, lust and love and then return to the nest to happily discharge our commitment towards care, nurturance, love and compassion.” (Pathak, 2021, p.88-89). Apart from the separate instances dealt with, the reader, upon reflection, may also find parallels on our mechanically applied mental rules on what can and cannot be said or thought. The act of thinking, arguably the most private of acts, itself is subject to self-censorship. Shame, guilt and self-loathing prevail when there is a tendency for our thoughts to run beyond the determined boundaries of decency and morality.

While the author has presented ordinariness as a sense of lightness and an organic relationship with oneself and the exterior, he has not attempted to provide a conceptual clarity to distinguish it from uncriticality. The line between being ordinary and being uncritical can often be quite slippery and in this sense, create abstractions for the concept of ordinary beyond the author’s intentions. Even though the author mentions the role of external, repressive regimes that unconsciously shapes one’s dispositions, he has stopped short of elaborating this further. The question remains. If the suppression of ordinariness is not an apparent process, is it ever possible to distinguish between ordinary and ‘unordinary’? Ultimately, one’s understanding of the ordinary itself becomes a mirror of our theoretical dispositions. On one hand, one’s ordinary

core may be looked at as being a function of the external world, while on the other hand, ordinary may be seen as the authentic core, which is ‘adulterated’ by the external controls.

Sociology is often understood as the critique of common-sense (Deshpande, 2003, p.5) and common sense involves various degrees of ordinariness. The above-mentioned criticisms withstanding, for scholars of the discipline, therefore, this book is an initiation into how different layers make up our perception of the world. What the author determines to be ordinary is mostly drawn from the author’s experiences growing up in the 1980s. This is evident from what the author terms as ordinariness by examining experiences of teachers, perception of Gandhi, mundanity of divinity and even Ramlila, which he claims to have undergone disruptions. This makes one ponder on how ordinariness itself is deeply personal and specific to space and time. A reader who spent his/her childhood and youth in a vastly different cultural context would have a shatteringly different idea of what it means to be ordinary. However, this is not to be perceived as a defect of the concept. Rather, it is a very characteristic feature of the idea of ordinary. Ordinariness is fluid. And ultimately it means to turn away from the imposing scales and balances that dictate our life from the exterior and look inward, to the ignored and hidden core of ourselves.

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