JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY POLITICS

Journal of Contemporary Politics

Official Publication of Bangalore University
July – September 2023, Volume 2, Issue 3

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Journal of Contemporary Politics

Original Article

Rising Hate Crime in India: A Gender and Religion Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Hate crime refers to criminal acts that are motivated by prejudice or bias towards a particular group based on factors such as race, religion, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation. In recent years, India has witnessed a disturbing trend of increasing hate crime incidents targeting individuals or groups based on their gender or religion. These incidents have serious implications for the affected communities, social cohesion, and the overall well-being of the society. This research paper aims to examine the issue of rising hate crime in India, with a specific focus on the gender and religion perspectives. Hate crimes in India refer to violent or abusive acts committed against individuals or groups based on their identity, such as religion, caste, or gender. These types of crimes are often motivated by a deep-seated prejudice or bias, and can have serious physical, emotional, and social consequences for the victims and their families.

Keywords: Crime; Gender; Caste; Religion; Politics; State Objectives

OBJECTIVES

1. To identify the existing problems
2. To identify the push and pull factors
3. The role of state addressing hate crime in India

PURPOSE OF WRITING THE PAPER

The purpose of this research paper is to shed light on the increasing incidence of hate crime in India, with a focus on the gender and religion aspects. Through a review of relevant literature and analysis of cases from 2018 to 2020, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the problem, its causes, and the challenges associated with addressing hate crime in India. By examining hate crime from gender and religion perspectives, this paper seeks to highlight the intersectional nature of hate crime and the unique challenges faced by different groups.

INTRODUCTION

Religious minorities in India, such as Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs, are particularly vulnerable to hate crimes. According to government data, incidents of communal violence targeting religious minorities have been on the rise in recent years, often fuelled by political and religious tensions. Dalits, also known as lower-caste individuals, also face a high risk of hate crimes, including physical violence, sexual assault, and discrimination in employment and education. Women in India are often targets of hate crimes, including rape, acid attacks, and domestic violence, often perpetrated by men who believe they are inferior or undeserving of respect. There are numerous factors that contribute to hate crimes in India, including social and economic inequality, political polarization, and cultural and religious biases. For example, the caste system, which has long been ingrained in Indian society, can lead to

discrimination and violence against lower-caste individuals. Similarly, religious tensions and prejudices can fuel hatred and violence against minority groups.

In India with such a diversity, political tension, religious feuds are very common. This basically comes under the bracket of hate crime. Talking about the recent years 294 cases of hate crimes against Christians, Muslims and Sikhs were recorded in India in 2021. Of these, most crimes (192) were recorded against Muslims, (95) against Christians and seven against Sikhs[1]. Political scientists, leaders of the opposition often claim that states that are governed by the BJP see incidents of hate crimes on a frequent basis. Hate crime is just not confined with religion. It also deals with gender caste. Hate crime based on gender is more common than we think, it has been normalised in our society so much that many times institutions don't even acknowledge it. The main problem because gender related crime is so prevalent in South Asian religion goes many centuries back. Majority of these countries in this religion belongs to a category of least developed countries, when we specifically talk about India in this context we must study every factor, India is quite a new nation with less than a total of 80 years of independence. Patterns of patriarchy that Indian societies follow are way too radical, the way women are portrayed in some of our religious text contributes a lot in shaping minds of people on how they want to see women and how they want to treat them.

This research paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of hate crimes in India, with a particular focus on the religion, caste, and gender aspect. Through a careful examination of government reports, media coverage, and victim testimonies, this study seeks to shed light on the complex and multifaceted nature of hate crimes in India, and to identify potential strategies for reducing and preventing such incidents in the future. Ultimately, the goal of this research is to raise awareness about the impact of hate crimes on Indian society and to promote greater understanding, tolerance, and social justice.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Several studies have explored the issue of hate crime in India, with a growing body of literature focusing on the gender and religion aspects. For instance, in a study conducted by the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) in 2019, it was found that hate crimes against women in India, particularly those from marginalized communities, have been on the rise. These crimes often involve sexual violence, including rape, harassment, and assault, and are often driven by factors such as caste, religion, and ethnicity. Similarly, studies have highlighted the increasing incidence of hate crimes against religious minorities, particularly Muslims and Dalits, in India. These crimes often involve violence, vandalism of religious places, and social ostracism.

GENDER PERSPECTIVE OF HATE CRIME IN INDIA

Hate crime against women in India has been a concerning issue. Women, especially those from marginalized communities, face multiple forms of discrimination based on their gender, caste, religion, and economic status, which makes them vulnerable to hate crimes. Cases such as the rape and murder of an eight-year-old girl from the Bakarwal community in Jammu and Kashmir in 2018, and the gang-rape and murder of a Dalit woman in Uttar Pradesh in 2019, highlight the gendered nature of hate crime in India. These incidents not only have severe physical and psychological consequences for the victims but also exacerbate existing social hierarchies and inequalities.

One of the most heinous forms of gender-based hate crimes in India is violence against women, including rape, sexual assault, domestic violence, and harassment. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) of India, the number of reported cases of crimes against women has consistently been on the rise. In 2018, there were 3,78,236 cases of crimes against women, and in 2019, the number increased to 4,05,861 cases, marking an increase of 7.4%[2].

NCRB data reveals that hate crimes against women are often motivated by gender bias and discrimination. In many cases, women are targeted because of their gender, and the crimes are perpetrated with the intent to subjugate and intimidate them. For instance, cases of dowry-related violence, acid attacks, and honour killings are frequently reported in India, where women are victimized due to deep-rooted patriarchal norms and discriminatory attitudes towards their gender[2].

Hate crimes against transgender individuals also pose a significant concern in India. Transgender persons face discrimination, harassment, and violence due to their gender identity and expression. According to the NCRB data, in 2018,[3] there were 2,445 reported cases of crimes against transgender individuals, including assault, harassment, and sexual violence. This number increased to 2,913 cases in 2019, indicating a rise of 19.1%[2]. These statistics highlight the vulnerability of transgender persons to hate crimes and the urgent need to address this issue from a gender perspective.

Several high-profile cases have brought attention to the gender perspective of hate crimes in India. For example, the 2012 Delhi gang rape case, also known as the Nirbhaya case, shocked the nation and led to widespread protests demanding justice for the victim and addressing the issue of violence against women. Similarly, the 2020 Hathras gang rape case, where a young Dalit woman was brutally raped and murdered, sparked outrage and calls for action to address caste-based violence against women.

RELIGION PERSPECTIVE OF HATE CRIME IN INDIA

Hate crimes against religious minorities, particularly Muslims, have also witnessed a disturbing rise in India. Cases such as the mob lynching of a Muslim man in Rajasthan in 2018 and the attack on a Muslim family in Haryana in 2019 reflect the religious bias and intolerance prevalent in the society[1]. These incidents are often fuelled by religious polarization, communal tensions, and discriminatory attitudes towards religious minorities. The role of social media in spreading hate speech and misinformation, which further fuels hate crimes, has also been documented in several studies. The relationship between gender and religion is a complex and multifaceted issue that has been the subject of much debate and discussion. Many religions have traditional beliefs and practices that are often based on patriarchal structures, which can lead to the marginalization and discrimination of women and other gender minorities.

In some religious traditions, women are not allowed to hold certain positions of power, participate in certain rituals, or even enter certain spaces. This can limit their ability to fully engage in and contribute to their communities. Additionally, some religious texts and teachings have been interpreted in ways that reinforce gender stereotypes and reinforce gender inequality. However, it's also important to recognize that many religious communities are actively working to address these issues and promote gender equality. Some religious leaders and scholars are advocating for more inclusive interpretations of religious texts and traditions, and many religious organizations are implementing policies and practices that promote gender equity. Ultimately, the relationship between gender and religion is complex and varies widely across different traditions and communities. It's important to engage in respectful dialogue and critical thinking when approaching this issue, and to work towards creating more inclusive and equitable religious communities.

ISSUES FACED BY PEOPLE BECAUSE OF THEIR GENDER AND RELIGION

The problem of gender and religion refers to the challenges and discrimination that women and marginalized genders face based on their religion or religious beliefs. In many societies, religion and cultural practices are intertwined, leading to the subordination of women and marginalized genders. This can manifest in various forms, such as discriminatory laws and policies, violence and harassment, denial of education and employment opportunities, and restrictions on freedom of movement and expression. Some common issues related to gender and religion include unequal access to healthcare and education, child marriage, female genital mutilation, honour killings, forced veiling, and limited political representation. In some cases, religious leaders and institutions have been accused of perpetuating or condoning these practices, which can make it difficult to address the issue.

Gender and religion issues are not unique to one religion or region, but can be found in many societies around the world. It is important to recognize and address these issues to promote gender equality and social justice. This can involve challenging discriminatory cultural practices, advocating for legal reforms, and promoting education and awareness-raising campaigns to change attitudes towards women and marginalized genders. There are many issues faced by people because of their religion and gender, and the ways in which these issues manifest can vary depending on the specific cultural, social, and political contexts. Here are some examples:

DISCRIMINATION AND PREJUDICE

People of certain religions or genders may face discrimination or prejudice in various aspects of their lives, such as employment, education, housing, and healthcare. For example, women may be paid less than men for the same work, and members of minority religions may be denied jobs or opportunities based on their religious affiliation.

VIOLENCE AND HARASSMENT

People may face physical or verbal violence or harassment because of their religion or gender. For example, women may face sexual harassment or assault, and members of religious minority groups may face hate crimes or violent attacks.

LEGAL AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY

People may face legal or social inequality based on their religion or gender. For example, in some countries, women may not have the same legal rights as men, and members of minority religions may be denied the right to practice their religion freely.

CULTURAL STEREOTYPES AND EXPECTATIONS

People may face cultural stereotypes or expectations based on their religion or gender. For example, women may be expected to be caregivers and not pursue careers, and members of minority religions may be seen as exotic or inferior.

RELIGIOUS CONFLICT AND INTOLERANCE

People may face conflict and intolerance because of their religion or the religion of others. This can lead to social tension and violence, as well as the marginalization and exclusion of certain groups.

CASES

There were several high-profile cases related to gender and religion that took place in India between 2018 and 2020. Here are some examples:

1. **Sabarimala Temple Case:** In 2018, the Supreme Court of India allowed women of all ages to enter the Sabarimala Temple in Kerala, which had previously barred women of menstruating age from entering the temple. This decision was met with protests from traditionalists who argued that it violated their religious beliefs.

2. **Triple Talaq:** In 2019, the Indian parliament passed a law criminalizing instant triple talaq, a practice in which a Muslim man could divorce his wife by saying "talaq" (divorce) three times in quick succession. The law was controversial, with some Muslim groups arguing that it violated their religious freedom.

3. **Hathras Gang Rape Case:** In 2020, a 19-year-old Dalit woman was gang-raped and murdered in Hathras, Uttar Pradesh. The case sparked protests across India and drew attention to the issue of violence against Dalit women. The victim's family accused the police of mishandling the case and suppressing evidence.

4. **Delhi Riots:** In 2020, violent clashes erupted in the northeast district of Delhi between supporters and opponents of India's controversial citizenship law, which fast-tracks Indian citizenship for non-Muslim migrants from neighbouring countries. The riots left over 50 people dead and hundreds injured, with reports of targeted attacks on Muslims and their properties.

5. **Babri Masjid Verdict:** In 2019, the Supreme Court of India ruled that a Hindu temple could be built on the site of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh. The mosque had been demolished by Hindu mobs in 1992, sparking religious riots across India. The verdict was celebrated by Hindus but criticized by Muslims and secularists who saw it as a blow to India's secularism.

6. **Discrimination and prejudice:** People of certain religions or genders may face discrimination or prejudice in various aspects of their lives, such as employment, education, housing, and healthcare. For example, women may be paid less than men for the same work, and members of minority religions may be denied jobs or opportunities based on their religious affiliation.

7. **Violence and harassment:** People may face physical or verbal violence or harassment because of their religion or gender. For example, women may face sexual harassment or assault, and members of religious minority groups may face hate crimes or violent attacks.

8. **Legal and social inequality:** People may face legal or social inequality based on their religion or gender. For example, in some countries, women may not have the same legal rights as men, and members of minority religions may be denied the right to practice their religion freely.

9. **Cultural stereotypes and expectations:** People may face cultural stereotypes or expectations based on their religion or gender. For example, women may be expected to be caregivers and not pursue careers, and members of minority religions may be seen as exotic or inferior.

10. **Religious conflict and intolerance:** People may face conflict and intolerance because of their religion or the religion of others. This can lead to social tension and violence, as well as the marginalization and exclusion of certain groups.

ROLE OF STATE

The state plays a crucial role in addressing and preventing hate crimes in India. Hate crimes refer to criminal acts committed against individuals or groups based on their identity, such as religion, caste, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation. These crimes can take the form of physical violence, verbal abuse, or property damage. In India, the state has a duty to protect all its citizens and ensure their safety and security. The Indian Penal Code (IPC) has provisions that criminalize hate crimes and prescribe punishment for the offenders. For example, Section 153A of the IPC prohibits promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion, race, or language, while Section 295A criminalizes deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings.

The state has also established special laws and institutions to deal with hate crimes. For instance, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, aims to prevent atrocities against people belonging to these communities. The National Commission for Minorities (NCM) is another institution set up by the state to safeguard the rights of minorities in the country. The police and other law enforcement agencies have a crucial role to play in preventing and investigating hate crimes. The state must ensure that the police are sensitized to the issue of hate crimes and are trained to handle cases of hate crimes effectively. Additionally, the state must ensure that the legal system functions efficiently and delivers justice to the victims of hate crimes. The state has a critical role in preventing and addressing hate crimes in India. It must take proactive measures to ensure the safety and security of all its citizens, regardless of their identity. This involves enacting and implementing laws to criminalize hate crimes, setting up institutions to protect the rights of minorities, and sensitizing law enforcement agencies to the issue of hate crimes.

METHODOLOGY

This section describes the research methodology used in our study, which involved a combination of a questionnaire method followed by qualitative methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of hate crime in the Indian society. This mixed-methods approach allowed us to capture qualitative data, enabling us to explore patterns, trends, and experiences related to the increasing hate crime in India.

QUESTIONNAIRE METHOD

The first phase of the research involved the use of a questionnaire to gather quantitative data from a diverse sample of respondents (n=52) across different regions, religious backgrounds, and demographic groups in India. The questionnaire was designed to measure respondents' attitudes, beliefs, and experiences related to hate crime in India, including their perceptions of religious diversity, tolerance, discrimination, and the role of the government in protecting the human rights. The questionnaire included a mix of closed-ended questions, such as Likert-scale items and multiple-choice questions, and open-ended questions that allowed respondents to provide their perspectives in their own words. The sample was selected using a combination of random sampling and purposive sampling techniques to ensure the representation of diverse religious communities and geographical. Data was collected through online surveys, face-to-face interviews, and telephone interviews, depending on the respondents' preferences and accessibility.

ABOUT THE STUDY

A survey was conducted with about 52 participants in Delhi with various languages, regional identity and cultures. The questionnaire consists of 25 basic questions on the increasing Hate Crime in India and how it impacts the people of the society and India. The responses were varied and vast in nature and gave a generic idea of how people perceive religion and gender especially with the reference to political identity and regional identity.

DISCUSSION

As per the study, 38.5% of the respondents have neutral responses on the identification of 'Weak' and 'Strong' cultural heritage with respect to the Indian culture. The weak and strong identification marks the Majority and Minority cultural groups in India. The majority groups are more in terms of their population and geographical area, where as the minority are lesser in number. A constant rift is seen between the Hindus as the majority as the Muslims as the minority in India. People of India are becoming more ethnocentric to gain the hierarchal power in India, which usually results in communalism, chaos and destruction. Politics plays an

In terms of cultural identity people talk of `weak' and `strong' identification with their cultural heritage. How would you place your identification with Indian culture on this scale, generally speaking?
52 responses
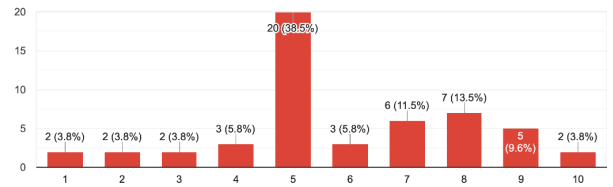
Fig. 1:

important role in highlighting and pushing the rift between the two communities. For examples, movies such as Kashmir files and the Kerala story are referred to as propaganda films for targeting a specific community, which was made tax free by many states.

For me, religious freedom means, equality of various religions in society before the law.
52 responses
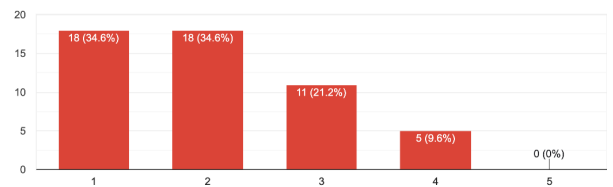
Fig. 2:

As per the study, 34.6% respondents believe that religious freedom means equality of various religions in society before law. The constitution provides equal Human rights irrespective of their caste, religion, colour, creed. India is a secular, democratic nation as it is mentioned in the preamble of India, thus all religion is equal before the law. Even then we find out the ongoing enmity between different groups which is dividing the nation into various strata. One such example can be seen in the case of the Babari Masjid and the Ayodhya Temple. The pleasure of defeating one's religious place of worship was seen among the citizens of India.

As per the study, 50% of the respondents believe that people have the freedom to wear religious clothes/symbols in public places in India. Wearing symbolic clothes or items have always been an issue in various institution. Whether it is the Hijab (muslim) controversy, Turban (sikh) controversy or women wearing casual clothes in Temples and gurudwaras. If we observe carefully, we are not only trying to dominate a particular religious group but also holding women as minority groups. Such restrictions are only imposed on women, when it comes to religion, for example the Hijab ban in Karnataka Colleges or wearing objectionable clothing items in temples. The society is way

Do you think that you have Freedom to wear religious clothes/symbols in public places?
52 responses

Fig. 3:

Do you believe that the state should protect women's right to adequate job opportunities ?
52 responses

Fig. 5:

deeper and more complex than we consider it to be, one cannot fully understand and analyse the society.

Do you think that the state should prosecute behavior that discriminates against homosexuals?
52 responses
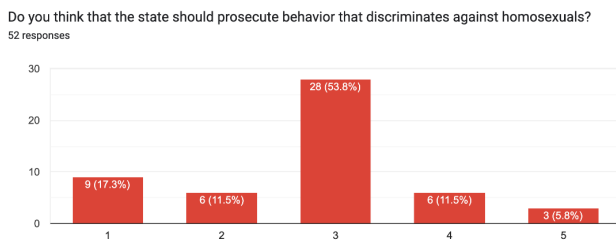
Fig. 4:

As per the study, 53.8% respondents have neutral opinion on whether the state should prosecute behaviour that discriminates against homosexuals. Homosexuality is a new concept for the people of India, the cultural and traditional shift was not easy to accept the concept of homosexuality. Although we still lack solidarity and complete acceptance of such terms. The LGBTQ community also comes under the minority group along with women, both are equally the victims of patriarchy. The entire month of June is celebrated as the pride month to increase reach and break the shackles of rigid mindset. Countries such as Africa and Singapore have banned Same sex marriage, which means it is illegal to be a gay/lesbians in such countries and they can be put into prison for violating them. In India, no such laws have been made yet, which has emerged as a victory for the LGBTIQQ community.

As per the study, 36.5% of the respondents believe that the state should protect women's rights to adequate job opportunities. Womens voice have been oppressed since the time we knew that society has been established. It was assumed that women will be the caretaker of the family, while men will be the bread earners. Thus, for years women have only been assigned the role of a mother and a wife. Education for women was not compulsory or highly appreciated, since they were expected to be married off at a young age. The suffragette movement bought changes and

helped women to fight for their rights. We have seen many female fighters and reformers who have fought for female and human rights. The society is changing b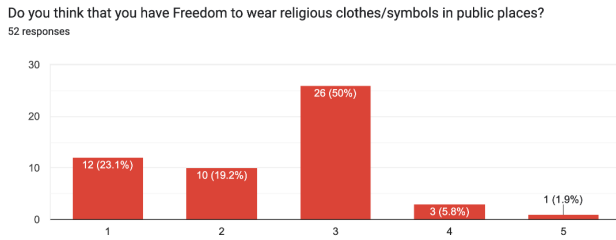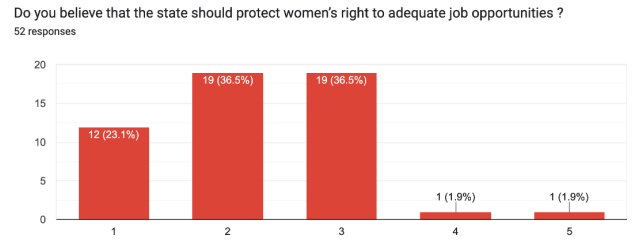ut the challenge of patriarchy still exists in the society which restricts women to study or work. Only 33% women in India are into labour sector or employed, which is less than half of the population, which means we are yet to develop in the development sector of women in India.

SOCIAL THEORY ASSOCIATED

Conflict Theory by Karl Marx

One sociological theory that offers valuable insights is the conflict theory, developed by Karl Marx. This theory presents a comprehensive framework for analysing societal divisions and power struggles. Applying the conflict theory to hate crime in India illuminates the interplay between social inequalities and acts of targeted violence. In the context of India, hate crimes predominantly target marginalized communities, including religious minorities, lower castes, and ethnic groups. The conflict theory asserts that such crimes stem from deeply entrenched prejudices and a quest for maintaining social dominance. By perpetrating hate crimes, dominant groups assert their power and reinforce existing social hierarchies, further marginalizing vulnerable communities.

The conflict theory emphasizes the influential role of social institutions in perpetuating hate crimes. Media outlets that portray certain groups negatively, politicians who exploit communal tensions for personal gain, and discriminatory laws all contribute to the proliferation of hate crimes. These institutions, often controlled by the powerful, shape public opinion and compel individuals to engage in acts of violence against targeted communities. Effectively addressing hate crimes necessitates not only addressing individual acts of violence but also dismantling systemic inequalities and power structures. Initiatives that promote social justice, equality, and inclusivity are crucial for combating hate crime and fostering a more harmonious and equitable society in India.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study aimed to explore and address the existing problems related to hate crime in India, identifying the factors contributing to such crimes, and evaluate the role of the state in preventing and addressing hate crimes. The findings shed light on the multifaceted nature of hate crimes in India and the complex web of factors that influence their occurrence. Firstly, by examining the existing problems, this study revealed the alarming prevalence of hate crimes in India, with various communities being targeted based on factors such as religion, caste, ethnicity, and gender. These crimes have significant social, psychological, and economic consequences, undermining social cohesion and fostering an environment of fear and division. Secondly, the identification of push and pull factors highlighted the underlying dynamics contributing to hate crimes. Factors such as socio-economic disparities, political polarization, communal tensions, and misinformation play crucial roles in fuelling hatred and animosity among different groups. Social media platforms and digital spaces have emerged as powerful catalysts in disseminating hate speech and promoting violence. Lastly, the role of the state in addressing hate crimes is of utmost importance. While it is the responsibility of the state to ensure the safety and security of all citizens, this study revealed some gaps in the current approach. Efforts to prevent hate crimes should involve comprehensive legislation, effective law enforcement, and educational initiatives that promote tolerance, diversity, and inclusion. The state should establish specialized hate crime units and allocate resources for the support and rehabilitation of victims. To achieve these objectives, a collaborative approach between the government, civil society organizations, and communities is necessary. It is imperative to foster dialogue, encourage interfaith and intercultural exchanges, and promote empathy and understanding among diverse groups. By addressing the root causes of hate crimes and implementing proactive measures, India can strive towards a society that is inclusive, harmonious, and free from the scourge of hate crimes.

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Journal of Contemporary Politics

Original Article

Exploring Determinants of Urban Middle Class Women's Digital Identity: Evidences from Indian Cities

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ABSTRACT

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INTRODUCTION

Internet and digital media have transformed the way in which we live, interact and transact with each other. Digital content has come to inhabit the world we live in, where everything from memories to plans and knowledge to ideas are converted into electronic format that facilitates storage and transfer across distances and geographies, instantly. Though the digitization process is incumbent on the availability of physical infrastructure such as servers, cables and broadband and mobile phones, powered by wireless networks, landline telephones, radio and television broadcast alongside cutting-edge ICT pieces such as artificial intelligence and robotics acts as a prominent enabler[1].

The rapid pace of expansion of digital infrastructure has hastened the process of digitization. In India alone, internet access has registered a stupendous rise, from 4% in 2007 to around 45% in 2021 thus signifying that nearly half of the approximately 1.37 billion population have access to the internet for personal and professional reasons. This arguably makes India only second in the world in terms of active internet users[2]. Global statistics, however betray considerable discrimination in women's access to internet and mobile with about 85% of women having access to the internet, 83% of women owning a mobile phone and 58% using mobile internet compared to a nearly 100% usage among men (GSMA, 2021). Notwithstanding the positive impacts of digital revolution such as, quick and easy transmissibility of information, greater access, breaking down of barriers distance, language and socio economic difference to knowledge sharing to a large extent, its gains evidently do not spread horizontally or vertically, barriers being formed across gender and income groups among others. The divide is wider in low- and middle-income countries where reportedly a total of 1.7 billion

women orbit outside this digital web without owning an internet-enabled mobile phone thus considerably losing out access to newer types of jobs as also technology induced empowerment and identity-building opportunities[3]. In India, the largest beneficiaries of the internet and digital media expansion are from the well-educated, middle to high income, technologically literate urban sections, with 89% of the urban population in India having the benefit of 3G mobile broadband coverage as compared to only 29% digital users in the villages. More importantly, on average, 12% fewer women than men have been found to have unmitigated access to the internet, the gender gap widening due to the present pandemic (Mobile Gender Gap Report 2021)[2].

One of the particularly engaging aspects, and in many ways the premise of Web 2.0 is its ability to support user-generated content[4] and mobilities in an interactive and ubiquitous manner. Unlike the first-generation Web applications that relied mainly on individual sources for content creation, Web 2.0 is principally about shared content creation. Thus, social media, blogs, wikis applications and other digital networking sites all fall within its ambit[4] which represent a perceptible shift in the way the internet began to be used in the 21st century[4]. Within the digital world, this thrust towards shared content creation has led to newer network building and a multilayered web experience for millions of digital users nationally and internationally thereby impacting processes of identity building and self-representation online.

DEFINING IDENTITY & DIGITAL IDENTITY

The term identity implies two things. On one hand, identity is something unique to each of us as it distinguishes us from others. On the other hand, identity refers simply to a social category implying a relationship with a broader collective and is a matter of what we share with other people. In both the contexts identities are relatively stable, role-specific understandings and expectations about self and the other. Broadly understood, identity constitutes interests, habits, preferences and beliefs forming the basis of social relations, social group memberships and most importantly define 'who we are'. The processes of identity-making do not constitute an independent strategy. Rationality and choice are in fact fundamental to, and inextricably bound up into it. It has also been argued recently that identity construction is governed by particular motivational principles, like, self-esteem, efficacy, continuity, distinctiveness, belonging, and meaning. Herein, identity motives are defined as "pressures toward certain identity states and away from others, which guide the processes of identity construction"[5].

Digital identities are online versions of ourselves. They can be a subtype of a public persona, an extension of our 'true' selves, or they can be completely fabricated and fantastical, to function as a mask to hide the identity of an Internet user from rest of the world[4]. Simply put, it is a

reality or existence that in most cases will only exist on the Internet and not 'offline' in real life. A digital identity can spin intricate, interconnected webs utilising creative, social and interactive platforms that enable them to share and perform to an open or closed audience[6]. As Federman points out, "…the key cultural consideration of the Internet is not so much the digitization of information, but the digitization of us. How women approach the digital media; how they situate themselves within the varying digital environment; the different factors that motivate them to interact with the digital media how these factors distinguish their interaction on it. How do women create their identities on the Web?

This paper attempts to answer these questions based on survey of 540 middle class women respondents in Mumbai and Kolkata and their peri urban areas and Focus group discussion as well as semi structured interviews of women. It draws attention to different nodal points through which perhaps this interface can be understood. They are respectively (a) Age, (b) Socio-economic background of the participants, and (c) Physical Ability and Disability. The determinants of digital identity creation are similar to non-digital of offline identities however, the interplay between these are different giving rise new ways of negotiation with digital world. Further, the process and the purpose of digital identity creation for women does not tread the familiar lines creating new modes of

FIELD VIEW: PROFILING URBAN MIDDLE-CLASS WOMEN

The paper uses field notes from an Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), New Delhi, sponsored Major Research Project on "Women as 'Digital Subjects; Participating, Vulnerabilities and Building Empowerment". Government policy data, surveys, approach papers

This paper focuses on women in urban India, hence the social parameters and data presented pertain to the specific demographics. The study was conducted in two urban and peri-urban areas of Mumbai, Navi Mumbai and Kolkata and Howrah. The respondents included 540 women who were drawn from various socio-economic backgrounds, educational statuses, ages and religious groups. The work status of the demographics in the sample includes- students 41 per cent, salaried workers (formal and informal/ full-time and part-time) 31 per cent, homemakers 20 per cent and businesswomen or entrepreneurs 8 per cent. 46 per cent of these women reported a total family or household income of two to five lakhs per annum. The survey was conducted from January to May 2021 through a questionnaire, in-depth face to face or telephonic interviews and focus group discussions with targeted groups including home-based entrepreneurs in Kolkata and Mumbai. The survey was conducted with a total sample of 525 respondents- 284 from Mumbai- Navi-Mumbai, 241 from Kolkata- Howrah.

The survey respondents are defined as urban middle class Indians based on the following criteria-

- Education levels
- Language used for social media
- Occupations
- Household income
- Housing type
- Monthly spending on internet plans

The middle-class status of the survey respondents is determined in this research from the socio-economic characteristics of the demographics. Findings of the survey give some insights into the manner in which women use social media to construct new identities.

DETERMINANTS OF IDENTITY MAKING/CONSTRUCTION: THE YOUNG AND NOT SO YOUNG

The birth of a digital identity can start as easily and simply as creating a name, account or handle to register on an Internet website, and can be as elaborate as an online existence that spans over many different websites, including a multi-media trail that can include anything from photographs, text, videos, music and even live webcams. The survey shows that among the most important determinants of digital identity construction is age. Age plays an important role in determining the quantity and quality of time women spent online. Our surveys, fgds and interviews illustrate that women belonging to a younger generation (18-25 years, 26-35years and 36-45years) take to the digital media much readily for social, economic or even political expressions of their identity than those in the age bracket between 46-55 years and those around 60 years of age. Though, older women have are also acquainted with the digital media–especially social media, either by free will or for needs of exigency. It is however not the unfamiliarity with the medium that inhibits older women, but rather the strong public- private that prevents them from "putting themselves out there." Further the construction of self in the social media is mediated by societal lens; namely family, relatives, community and the like. . As some a respondents pointed out, "how can you put everything about yourself on the internet? What will my family members, friend's neighbours, think about me? What if they think I am showing off?" Younger women users on the other hand engage in electronic exhibitionism and strive to attract as much attention as possible. Younger women, across class and location showed greater openness in sharing on the internet, especially the social media. However, younger college going women more carefully curated the image that they wished "put out" carefully choosing the language, the pictures, the products, the emoji's and the views.

Interestingly the process of learning about and of the digital media, across age groups has been almost similar– interactional and self-taught (Table 1). Most women have acquired the knowledge of the medium either from their peers or from their family members. None of the respondents across age and class were trained to use digital media or underwent formal training in the same. In a FGD, school teachers–both retired and continuing shared how the digital media has become an integral part of their lives especially during Covid times. Respondents shared how their use of the digital has spread beyond the social media after March 2020 due to the pandemic imposed lockdown. This may not appear particularly significant, but seen in the context of gendered nature of technology, and women's laboured relationship with it, and its role in forming women's identities, it holds considerable importance. Despite, their limited knowledge of the application, the interactional nature of the medium and the possibility of self-learning using learning tools led women across age to embed in the medium.

Women now explore more expansive ways of using the digital media as one school teacher in her fifties pointed out that she not only interacts with her two daughters and their respective families who stay in Bangalore, through skype and whatsapp videos; she has also self-admittedly 'learnt' to read books online and even visit international museums and art galleries exhibitions online. Similarly, in a long interview, a woman entrepreneur who is in her end-fifties and based in Kolkata shared about successful her business through whatsapp in 2019 and continues to do so.

The fears and vulnerabilities about their digital identities, across age groups also are similar. Like younger women, older women in both the cities feared financial fraud as a major vulnerability. They admitted to be troubled by possibilities of being duped online but refused to be daunted and discouraged by such instances of fraud. Such new modes of knowing and interacting with the digital platforms, arguably, question any blanket generalization about the aged population taking lesser affinity towards these modes of communication than the younger generation.

The greater affinity with digital platforms, however does not necessarily translate into increased digital skill. Thus, almost all the school teachers who participated in the FGD, especially those who are still in the teaching profession, discussed how almost in every class they learnt something new about the digital platforms courtesy their students which in many ways problematised the unilateral relation between the 'teacher' and the 'student. What was interesting to note that almost all of them conformed to the idea that they lack digital skills since they are from a different generation. A woman entrepreneur who sells sarees through whatsapp also submitted how she was initially 'mocked' by her grown up sons for her inability to be properly skilled digitally. Though this did not deter her, it surfaced from almost all the fgds and interviews, that there is a certain 'reluctance' among the older generation to instantly take

Table 1: Survey Respondents: A Profile

Age Distribution: Kolkata & Mumbai (Women)

	18-25	26-35	36-45	46-55	>55
Kolkata	49.20%	20.40%	13.80%	10.40%	6.30%
Mumbai	38.90%	24.60%	16.80%	14.60%	5.60%
Total	**43.70%**	**22.70%**	**15.40%**	**12.70%**	**5.60%**

Education Level : Kolkata & Mumbai (Women)

	Below Graduate	Graduate & above
Kolkata	42.50%	57.50%
Mumbai	22.90%	77.10%
Total	**31.90%**	**68.10%**

Languages Preferred for Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube: Kolkata & Mumbai (Women)

	English for everything	English for Facebook, Indian language for Whatsapp and youtube videos	Indian language like Hindi, Marathi, Bengali for all
Kolkata	76.00%	6.00%	13.00%
Mumbai	71.00%	15.00%	13.00%
Total	**73.50%**	**11.00%**	**12.80%**

Occupation: Kolkata & Mumbai (Women)

	Student	Homemaker	Businesswomen	Salaried and other
Kolkata	46.70%	18.80%	6.30%	28.30%
Mumbai	36.40%	21.80%	8.90%	32.90%
Total	**41.20%**	**20.40%**	**7.70%**	**30.80%**

Family/Household Income: Kolkata & Mumbai

	Below 2 lakh	2 lakh- 5 lakh	5 lakh- 7 lakh	Above 7 lakh
Kolkata	36.70%	33.80%	13.80%	15.80%
Mumbai	27.90%	56.80%	3.20%	12.10%
Total	**31.90%**	**46.20%**	**8.10%**	**13.80%**

Type of Family Accommodation: Kolkata & Mumbai

	Owned/Rented House/Flat two or more rooms	Other
Kolkata	84.20%	15.80%
Mumbai	78.20%	21.80%
Total	**81.00%**	**19.00%**

Monthly Spending on Internet Plans (Household and/or Individual): Kolkata & Mumbai

	Less than Rs 200	Between Rs 200 and 500	More than Rs 500, but less than Rs1000	More than Rs 1000
Kolkata	26%	35%	28%	10%
Mumbai	22%	28%	14%	14%
Total	**24%**	**42%**	**21%**	**12%**

Table 2:

Q 19 What made you open a social media account like FB, WA, YT, etc?		
Mumbai & Kolkata	**Frequency**	**Percent**
Influence of peers/siblings	99	18.9
Desire to stay connected with friends/relatives	434	82.7
Professional/business reasons	155	29.5
Other	32	6.1
Total Sample	525	

to the digital medium and sites especially while making financial transactions. Thus, younger women in the FGDs pointed out that unlike them, the older members of their families prefer to make purchases not from e commerce sites or but from the local grocers. Similar experiences were cited by a Mumbai based baker and a fashion designer who shared during a FGD how they prefer offline transactions to online ones.

Familiarity or trust plays a major role in such financial transactions for the older generation to a large extent, who choose local sellers and traders over online sellers principally because they can 'see' the persons unlike the people in offline transactions. On the contrary, it is precisely this convenience of not having to deal with real people on a physical plane while making online choices that ticks the right box for the next generation of respondents for this project. This difference, that comes across more profoundly through surveys, reflects how women's choices on use of digital media is determined not due to consideration of age but on account of physical proximity, shared experiences and trust.

The issue of trust comes up regularly in women's narrative about their relation with digital media, but the nature of the narrative varies depending on women's location in age, class continuum. For young students of Mumbai as also Kolkata the issue of trust becomes significant in dealing with personal spaces particularly in relation to romantic relations and choice of partners. Young women respondents prefer anonymity in day to day and mundane encounters, however they are more circumspect in personal and more intimate relationship, where the element of trust creeps in. the acceptance of digital media for social interaction leading to romantic relationships still circumscribed existing social norms and patriarchal structures. In a FGD of young college going girls, one participant, from Mumbai argued that while Facebook and Instagram are good mediums of maintaining social relations, dating apps and romantic relations on the digital medium are best avoided. On being countered that online matrimonial sites do perform similar functions, the respondent countered that matrimonial sites are usually accessed with the knowledge and consent of family. They may also operate by a family member on behalf of women.

Such perspectives critically inform the identity construction of women digital users depending on their age as well

as respective socio-economic backgrounds. The case of an employee in Mumbai is illustrative. The young woman in her mid-20s works as a clerk and accountant. She initially claimed that she met her (now) husband on Facebook and married after befriending him. Gradually however she started to distance herself from her initial submission despite reluctantly accepting that she had first met him on Facebook, refused to acknowledge that it was Facebook friendship that had matured into a relationship and eventually marriage. She justified the FB friendship by saying that he lived in the same locality and when they decided to marry, he was approved by the family. In fact, she went at length to describe how he came over to her home in the presence of her sister and parents, with his parents and they sought her hand in marriage thus contradicting her own submissions in the course of the interview. Such zeal to portray an online affair and eventual marriage into an arranged one, reflects how the socio-economic gender and digital media intersect in shaping perspective on the self. The online identity creation may thus appear to democratic and unencumbered by patriarchal structures, which actually lie embedded in the identity creation process.

DIGITAL INTERACTIONS & SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS: SHARPENING THE CLASS DIVIDE

It was evident that the ubiquity of the digital platforms or the offline mode of communications held different import for different socio-economic classes. Such dominance of mode of knowledge dissemination didn't arguably have an empowering role in the lives of all. There seems to be a yawning gap between how respondents from educated middle classes and those from lower middle-class backgrounds residing off the main orbit of these two metro cities, perceive the new opportunities the digital world began to offer especially during the Covid times. This was aptly expressed by a post graduate student from one of the older universities of Kolkata. In the fgd held in March 2021, Maya (name changed for anonymity) had expressed her anguish and grievance at the overwhelming reliance on digital media for education purposes thus giving a counterpoint to the general discourses on the positive correlation between digital access, capacity building and empowerment. She had argued that the online nature of education leads to

increased expenses on data packs, smartphones or laptops, unlike books that can be physically borrowed from libraries. Maya's reasons for preferring the offline medium over digital medium for purposes of higher education might be solely financial but it does raise a very valid question regarding the purported equality created by the online medium. It sharply brings out the divisive force of digital medium, sharpening class and economic divide.

That the users remain conscious about their socio-economic background while using the digital media becomes further evident as there have been instances when students based in Mumbai in the course of a FGD refused to switch on their cameras despite requests, not so much on account of privacy of person but on account of her being acutely aware of the socio-economic status. The notion of seamless uniformity peddled by the digital media becomes further questionable. Such findings therefore underscore the socio-economic aspect of women's' identity that becomes relevant and pronounced only during their interaction with the digital media. The class divides finds resonance in the way and purpose for which urban middle class women use internet. Interestingly, survey data reveals that it is the economically better off women who propose faith in the empowering impact of digital media and it use it for purposes of business re-education. In their context, the intersectionality of gender, economic status and education becomes particularly prominent.

OF PHYSICAL ABILITY/DISABILITY

For women users of the digital platforms, it has been observed in the course of the interviews and FGDs that the virtues and limitations or the empowering and dis-empowering characteristics of the virtual world are more immediate and potent than to the users who are not plagued by any physical disability. Dr. T (name changed), who teaches in an undergraduate college. In two long one-to-one interview sessions shared her own experiences with disability. As a woman suffering from *Retinitis Pigmentosa* since childhood coming from the Bohra Muslim community, there is an interplay of various shades of potential tropes of disabilities–of religion, of gender, of physical disability in her identity building per se as also vis-a-vis the digital media. In her experience, digital media has had a miraculously enabling contribution to her higher education. Features like JAWS and NVDA that read out everything written on computer screen came to her rescue and enabled her to be self-reliant in a major way thus foregrounding aspects of her identity that would not have flowered but for her interaction with the digital platforms. These naturally have a tremendously constructive effect on how the visually impaired people perceive themselves as well as their relation with the wider world adding on to their functionality and making them far less dependent on other sighted persons that certainly brings in equality at some plane. What is

significant is that these features are inbuilt in the I-phone and Android technology and the fact that for 'disabled' persons there is no separate cellular technology or mobile set but the one which everyone uses–this feature being part of the normal settings, also arguably contributes to a sense of empowerment of such users like her. They do not feel segregated and yet enabled. Her experiences are very significant because till was overwhelmingly reliant on friends and writers to help her out This, according to her, altered completely once the computers came and juxtaposing her struggles and reliance on others in the pre-digital days with the present times when right from buying groceries to making financial transactions, acquiring teaching materials online or even to travel independently with the help of app cabs–she can literally do everything on her own with digital help. This has done wonders for her self- confidence and also added significantly to her identity building. It can thus be argued that in transforming 'disability' into 'ability' from a technical level to a physical plane, digital platforms do play a critical role.

Notwithstanding the tremendous enabling impact of the digital media, it is however difficult to generalize the positive effects of the digital platforms in enabling physically challenged women especially if they are economically weak. Considering that not everyone who is visually impaired can afford an IPhone or a JAWS program that needs to be bought, this aspect is similar to what Maya had shared during the FGD regarding the divisive impact or inequality spread by the digital media–discourses that often get obscured or missed amidst the celebratory perceptions of the digital world. Capacity building via digital means that contributes effectively to the processes of identity construction of the users thus relies heavily on the socio-economic background of the users. Many digital platforms however are not as yet sensitive to the issue or needs of physically challenged or visually impaired people. So while some sites and their apps are disabled friendly, others have not been designed in such a way, despite repeated demands. There are however many capacity building apps, like one floated by RBI that helps the visually challenged to identify banknotes on their own –a feature that undoubtedly has a tremendous empowering aspect saving them from being dependent on others and most importantly form being duped financially; 'Be My Eyes' app to get in touch with volunteers in one's locality to avail of medicines, food etc. The feature of 'Track the Ride' installed in Uber also helps in keeping families connected with the whereabouts of the users thus making mobility safer and also helping the user perform multiple roles. Ability to use apps or the capacity to lead a normal life has of course made life simpler for women who are physically disabled but have access and entry into the digital world–both socio-economically as well as human resource wise i.e they not only can afford those digital devices but also have friends and family who encourage them to participate in and have their

own share of digital experiences that ranges from functional to finding new hobbies, learning new skills like cooking etc. The intersection of gender, disability and economic status complicates the matter further.

DIGITAL LITERACY: THE GREAT DIVIDE

Education per se and more importantly digital literacy becomes an important factor influencing the identity building process of the users. And it might be argued that Dr. Tundawla could navigate through her disability and the digital world principally because of her education. Her stint into higher education arguably elevated her to a state where her blindness could not act as a deterrence. Taking off from her example, it would be interesting to explore whether a higher educational background itself would ensure greater digital skills. In other words, the inter-relationship and the difference between education and digital literacy becomes a significant factor for identity construction. -a fact that has been borne out by responses from a FGD conducted with schoolteachers in Kolkata where retired as also in-service school teachers admitted that each day they are discovering new things about how to use the digital platforms more effectively with the help of their students or grown-up children since "our generation does not actually know how to use it properly"; it also raises a number of related questions.

The above statistics categorically point out that the overwhelming reliance on and therefore access to the smartphone as a digital device of preference—a preference that again is more among the Kolkata users, even if by a few percentages, than among the Mumbai women respondents.

THE NATURE OF WOMEN'S DIGITAL IDENTITY

Both Online and Offline Surveys and Focus Group Discussions held with people from various walks of life as well as experts reveal that while women take to the social media for a plethora of reasons ranging from reconnecting with friends and family etc. to bolstering/making their professional image–all of these can be read as creation of self-identity.

The urge to communicate to others as also to keep track of what others are doing etc. are expressions of such creations of identity. Survey analysis shows that a wide percentage of respondents in both Mumbai and Kolkata prefer to share birthday and anniversary details on social media as also photographs pertaining to such events as also festive images, images of themselves, friends and family without much reservations or fear of being stalked, such images being secretly downloaded by stalkers etc. Networking and sharing emerge as key drivers of social media interaction and consequently, the content creation hovers around creation of identity that closely resembles on that would ensure greater collaboration.

The interactions however are not always limited to sharing of images but also includes quotations, emoji's, poetry and write up that reflect their desire to "become". As one respondent pointed out, I often put out my verses on the social media, and the appreciation that I get gives me a great amount of satisfaction. The recognition that interactive social media affords creates a sense of empowerment that women often seem to lack on offline spaces. Most respondents that we spoke to referred to the social media as a democratic space that engenders opportunities to realise unfulfilled desires.

AN AGENCY TOWARDS CREATING INDEPENDENT ECONOMIC IDENTITY

The different levels and layers of women's agency vis-a-vis the digital medium needs to be understood and analysed. Broadly seen, the economic dimension of their identity formation generally translates into economic independence that ranges from the independence to choose e-commerce merchandise for personal use to buying groceries for household; from placing orders for medicines to launching own online start-up enterprise; from accessing google pay or paytm to transferring money through amazon pay–to name a few and prominent expressions of such agency. While all such expressions generally have an empowering subtext for women, there are instances when they feel terribly disempowered especially when they face financial fraudulence. In sum however, the financial autonomy that digital media accors women in delaing with their everyday life creates a sense of autonomy.

SOCIAL MEDIA & REACHING OUT

In response to questions as to what made them share such slices of private lives online, most respondents across the Metros shared that it was to connect and share their lives with friends and family existing virtually and the prospect of getting their images 'liked' and 'loved' on social media that makes them share more. This exercise of connecting by sharing images and news involves emotional investment that women make on relationships. For most women, it was an attempt at "reaching out". Social media posts are used to gauge the mood, the status and achievements of the respondents and relate appropriately. Social media thus becomes important in widening and deepening relationships. But it comes with a downside. All young women students mentioned, if their posts are not liked, it leads to anxieties, self-doubt and question of acceptability within their peer group –they keep counting the number of likes. And a lesser number of likes to a post creates self-doubts.

Thus, construction of 'I' itself is dependent on social media reach, presence, responses. The self-image and self-worth for women, especially those in the younger age bracket of 18-35 years integrally linked to social media presence. It is

Table 3:

Q 20 What do you use the digital platform for?		
Mumbai	Frequency	Percent
Entertainment like watching videos, movies, etc	183	64.4
Connecting with family and friends	202	71.1
Shopping	129	45.4
Business/ professional purposes	99	34.9
Education like doing courses	174	61.3
News	132	46.5
Others		
Total Sample	284	
Kolkata	Frequency	Percent
Entertainment like watching videos, movies, etc	215	89.2
Connecting with family and friends	204	84.6
Shopping	116	48.1
Business/ professional purposes	82	34.0
Education like doing courses	108	44.8
News	121	50.2
Others	11	4.6
Total Sample	241	

therefore not surprising and women across cities and age, use multiple social media apps multiple times in a day, largely for connecting with others. Such social media interaction is carried out with minimum concern for privacy. Though such expectations and responses problematize the concept of privacy and also blurs the boundaries between private and public.

The use of emojis also is very important and can be read both ways. On one hand it can be used as part of a fad. Emojis also are used habitually and not much emotion is invested in them each time. But emojis are very popular along with stickers, gifs etc. For emojis, there is a gender connotation also.

SEARCH FOR NEW IDENTITY/ FREEDOM

In both Mumbai and Kolkata, almost all women shared that they were initiated to social media by their friends. Almost none were taught about social media. The younger women categorically mentioned that they entered the social media space after completion of their school so as to 'exercise their freedom'. They were keen to construct and embody an identity different from that of a school goer; wanted to transform their identity and build something new one. Hence, when they interact on the social media, a different kind of identity creation and a space is being created that at times challenges the usual gender binaries. There have been instances, our respondents told us that in recent times when women bloggers or social media users have been perceived as men online and they do not seem to mind that. Social media giants like Twitter have specific policies against profile impersonation that clearly states that anyone posing as or pretending to be another person, brand, or organization in a confusing or deceptive manner may be permanently suspended under Twitter's impersonation policy. While such rules pertain to fake profiles, assertion of gender-neutral digital identities is an important development and further research on this aspect can well bring out different nuances of gender identities and their consequent overlaps, creation of new identities, creation of new myths. Focus on such new gender-neutral identities can spark further discussions on the kind of mobility that is involved in such identity constructions and whether such processes of identity creations manage to cut across various social hierarchies.

DIGITAL IDENTITIES ONE OR MANY?

Women's identity online is mediated by the purpose for which such identity is created. It is therefore not unusual for women to by multiple identities or fake identities. While motivations for creation of false or fake profiles online range from hacking to cyber bullying to mundane reasons like fashioning and projecting a self-different and 'better' than the real one online to garner more 'likes', 'friends' etc. thus boosting one's ego[7], hidden and embedded workings of patriarchy might also be inhibiting women's free self-expression in the offline world. Many respondents during surveys for this research indirectly spoke about how it is the men of the house who determine their smartphone

usage time or how the wives can log online only when their husband returns home (as a respondent from Horwah shared). While hardly any of them admitted to have created fake profiles, many shared how they do own multiple profiles on social media thus automatically giving fuel to the hypothesis that it is the need to live out different aspects of their personalities or perhaps to shape a chosen self –that is not possible within the traditional patriarchal structures of the family, that perhaps lead to multiple profiles or even fake profiles. Social media in many ways thus shapes multiple identities or realities that are false/pseudo, thus making interactions 'online' seem more real and true, especially to the youth as found from the research conducted for this project in Mumbai and Kolkata, than the offline interactions. This leads to a blurring of boundaries and creation of identities—different from the real self of the user. Like offline contexts, digital identity is thus the product of an individual's specific pattern of use, determined by variables such as interest, personality and skills.

Irrespective of the type of representation, the creation of multiple identities seems vital to explain the intricate intermingling of resources so evident in online spaces. This implies that women users have the potential to successfully participate in multilingual spaces, harbor different perspectives and choices to shuttle between the various realms of an integrated digital system. Thus users have the freedom to open any profile for themselves that does not necessarily reflect their real-life gender or identity.

CONCLUSION

Digitization of content and data, as well as new digital communication technologies, have opened up novel opportunities for women, giving them greater opportunities, better choices and more information of avenues that appeared unavailable hitherto. The convenience of digital media and work or shopping from home especially in time of lockdown and pandemic, when the survey was conducted points to the special benefits that Digital media has conferred in reducing the subjectivity of women due to lack or limited social mobility. Home based women entrepreneurs and businesswomen as well as working women have found these to be particularly advantageous. The flexibility afforded by digital media allows for better work-life integration – a critical element in enabling women to effectively juggle multiple roles as workers, managers and caregivers. However, women's digital identities are always involved in search of newer new and perhaps unfulfilled persona's largely through interaction and interworking. As in the non digital world in the digital world too, women seek fulfilment through collaboration and networking in search for personas that give them a sense of free will.

Often the content that was created and shared on the digital media are related to different aspects of the of socio cultural lives of women. Goffman's idea that social interaction and face to face interaction are framed as theatrical performances, with the metaphor of the self as a performer and life being a stage with the back stage symbolizing privacy and private lives and the front stage symbolizing the public and public actions, easily translates to the notion of the digital identity being a mode of performance or theatrics that utilizes the online environment as a stage on which to perform

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Journal of Contemporary Politics

Original Article

Indian Parliament in Transition: A Perspective (2004-2021)

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ABSTRACT

India has been successful in sustaining the ethos and functioning of parliamentary democracy for more than 70 years, which is undoubtedly an achievement. India's experiment with parliamentary democracy has succeeded in influencing its neighbours to endorse such a form of democracy. However, since the past few decades, the functioning of the Indian Parliament has been witnessing a transformation in terms of its composition; the number of parliamentary sittings held and the time spent; debates and the passing of bills; issue of ordinances; increasing disruption of sessions and so on. This article attempts to critically analyse the performance of the Indian Parliament since 2004 onwards and the way forward. If effective measures are not initiated to prevent the decline in its functioning, it would not only lead to the failure of the institutions of democracy, but democracy itself.

Keywords: Parliament; India; South Asia; Disruption; Bills; Democracy

INTRODUCTION

The success of India's experiment with parliamentary democracy, over the decades, has lured its neighboring countries to follow it closely and endorse it. Inspired thereby, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Maldives have been strengthening their parliamentary institutions. Interestingly, Bhutan witnessed a transition from monarchy to democracy during the third National Assembly elections held in October 2018 (the first took place in 2008 and the second in 2013), with the victory of the Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa (DNT) party. In 2013, for the first time in the history of Pakistan, a civilian government handed over power to another civilian government after completion of its full term in office. Both in Nepal and Maldives, after a lot of political turmoil and instability, new governments have been elected. Similarly, in Myanmar there

has been a holistic shift of power from a military regime to democracy. All these trends, in different ways, signify the maturing of the democratic processes within each country in South Asia. Hence, the democratic form of government is gradually gaining deep roots in South Asian countries.

The reason why South Asian countries have adopted and been able to sustain it, lies in the advantages of parliamentary democracy, that is: (a) It represents the will of the people and deliberates the tasks of policymaking. As a representational body, the Parliament integrates the regional community, while as a deliberative body it endeavours to solve the problems of the country. (b) It discusses a variety of issues, including international, regional and ethnic issues and explores alternatives to peacefully address the problems. (c) It provides a forum for the articulation of radical demands while avoiding conflict. Legitimate aspirations that tend to get crushed under tendencies of centralisation are

not labelled anti-national if they are voiced through the Parliament. (d) With its primary function being deliberation, it encourages the free flow of people and information, the "representational functions of grievance ventilation, education and advice without prejudice to the existing territorial sovereignties"[1]. It is rightly stated that Parliament as an institution is a public forum for the ventilation of grievances[2]. (e) The parliamentary process is based on debate and negotiation. It is at the level of negotiations that Parliament is the most effective medium[2]. (f) It harmonises aspirations such as constructing a regional identity amongst the political elites, strengthening the emblematic regional organisation with the help of public opinion and third countries, and facilitating intra-regional communication. (g) It helps the country to address the common problems and concerns confronted by states/provinces such as poverty, gender issues, migration, trade barriers, human rights, natural disasters, climate change, terrorism, drugs, arms and human trafficking and so on. (h) Parliamentary debates and committee systems check upon the government's accountability and thereby enable the framing of good and balanced public policies.

At the same time, in South Asian countries, the parliamentary system is under continuous stress and is still evolving. In Sri Lanka, the then President Rajapakse became more powerful than the Parliament due to the 18th Amendment of the Constitution, weak opposition parties and his government being the majority in Parliament. Now with Gotabaya Rajapakse, the former defence minister and the brother of Mahida Rajapakse, becoming the President (November 2019), there is a prevailing perception that the powers of Parliament would be further curtailed. Bangladesh has witnessed frequent military rule or fragile parliamentary structure and deep dissonance between the two main rival political parties, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Awami League (AL), which in a way has challenged democracy. In Nepal, even though there have been several significant changes in the political arena, the lack of political consensus and increasing polarisation on the question of federalism have led the country on the path of instability. In the Maldives, the advent of democracy has brought to the fore various challenges like the politicisation of the media, ineffective functioning of Parliament, lack of independence of institutions, and increasing use of religion as a political tool[3]. Similarly, both Afghanistan and Pakistan have witnessed serious distortions in democratic institutions over the decades. Thus, the functioning of parliamentary democracy in South Asia has been a mixed baggage of success and failure. In this regard, India is no different.

The Indian parliamentary system also has failed to evolve a healthy political culture in the functioning of the Parliament and its associated institutions. Phenomena like political defections, indiscipline, corruption and power struggles have not allowed healthy norms and traditions

of parliamentary functioning to take roots. The opposition has tended to boycott Parliament to make political points, neither have the ruling parties shown due deference to the opposition[4]. Thus, many observers, including the parliamentarians agree with the view that the functioning of the Parliament is declining due to the increasing criminalisation of politics; a decreasing number of sittings days; fewer time spent over the scrutiny of bills; regular disruption; passing of a limited number of bills, including private bills; adoption of increasing number of ordinances and so on.

INDIAN PARLIAMENT IN TRANSITION

Generally, the Parliament represents the people, it debates and scrutinises bills and examines the actions of the government and the executive. To a certain extent, India has been successful in sustaining the ethos and functioning of parliamentary democracy for more than 70 years, which itself is an achievement. As a result, successive Indian political leaders, from Jawaharlal Nehru to the present Prime Minister Narendra Modi, have ostensibly regarded the Parliament as the "Temple of Indian democracy".

Prime Minister Nehru, despite his domination in the Indian political system, played a critical role in building this institution, which he termed as the "supreme representative institution of the nation"[5]. As a result, he regularly participated in the parliamentary debates and also attended the Question Hour, even when his ministry was not involved. With his demise in 1964, the quality of debate and questions posed by opposition leaders/parties rose, due to the active participation of legislators like S.A. Dange, Indrajit Gupta, H.V. Kamath, M.B. Kripalani, Madhu Limaye, Bal Raj Madhok, Ashok Mehta, Nath Pai and A.B. Vajpayee[6].

Indira Gandhi's landslide victory in 1971, to a certain extent, began to see the downfall of parliamentary proceedings, as she continued to blame the Parliament for its failure to approve legislation enhancing her power. When Emergency rule was imposed in 1975, many members of the Parliament were imprisoned and legislative debates gradually declined or were censored. With the Janata Party coming to power in 1977, there was a temporary respite in restoring the dignity of Parliament. But when Mrs Gandhi returned to power in 1980, according to Robert Hardgrave and Stanley Kochanek, "she showed scant respect for the institutions [Parliament], spent less and less time in the house, and used her majority to dominate the legislative process"[7]. This trend continued after Rajiv Gandhi became prime minister with a two-thirds majority in 1984. He was absent from the Parliament even during important debates. The governments in 1989 and 1991 headed by V.P. Singh and Chandra Shekhar wanted to use Parliament to promote their agendas, but could not, because of coalition government politics and frequent defections. Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, who led the government from 1991, was no different from his Congress predecessors, despite having

a track record as a serious legislator. After Narasimha Rao's government, the successive governments were coalition governments; as a result, the political instability marked the political scenario of the time preventing the Parliament to function satisfactorily.

Narendra Modi's government came to power with a thumping majority and he entered the Parliament House as prime minister on 20 May 2014, and stated, "This is the temple of democracy"[8]. However, when he was chief minister of Gujarat since 2001, the state's Legislative Assembly sitting was just an average of 31 days in a year. Over 90 per cent of the bills were passed just in one day as soon as they were introduced and Modi's appearance in the Assembly sessions was also low[9]. Currently, Modi's appearances in the Parliament are limited due to frequent disruption of Parliament by the opposition parties, his frequent foreign visits (92 countries, as of December 2019)[10], and his centralised system of functioning as a virtual "presidential" prime minister. Hence, it can be concluded that the Parliament still continues to function in the same way as it did earlier during Modi's predecessors.

COMPOSITION OF THE PARLIAMENT

Owing to India's founding fathers, entering the Parliament required people's mandate, rather than other aspects like property, education and so on. As a result, Parliament has always consisted of cross-sections of society, and its members have come from different backgrounds, educational qualifications and cultural and linguistic legacy, in a way showcasing the diversity of India united together. The rise of regional political parties has made the Parliament even more representative and inclusive, a development that has strengthened democracy. In this process, the political party system has transformed from a one-party-dominant system to a more fragmented combination of national and regional parties. According to the Election Commission of India, there are 2,293 registered political parties (as of March 2019) which have become pivotal to forming stable majority coalitions at the centre[11].

At the same time, the process has allowed many persons with rich, corrupt and criminal backgrounds to get elected to the Parliament. According to the Association of Democratic Reforms (ADR), a civil society group, the 14th and 15th Lok Sabha (LS) consisted of around 30 per cent and 58 per cent richest MPs respectively[12]. In the 16th LS (2014), around 82 per cent (442 MPs) and 17th LS (2019), 88 per cent (475 MPs) of the members have assets worth over 10 million rupees each. Among the 16th LS, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had the maximum number of MPs - 237 out of 281[13]. The Congress had 44 MPs, among whom 80 per cent (35) were millionaire. Interestingly, the regional parties like Telugu Desam Party (TDP), Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) and YSR Congress Party (YSRCP) had the richest MPs, whose average assets were 500 million rupees. The TDP had the richest MP, with assets worth Rs 6830 million. At the 17th LS, of the 265 MPs (BJP), 43 MPs (Congress) and all the elected MPs from regional parties were millionaire[14]. Overall, the current 17th LS have the richest MPs in Indian history, and the trend seems to continue in the near future.

A criminal background has also been a key for candidates to get elected. Criminal charges against MPs include murder, rape, kidnapping, extortion, forgery, bribery, dacoity and causing grievous hurt by dangerous weapons. The number of MPs with criminal charges is increasing. The 16th LS had around 34 per cent members (186 out of 541) with criminal charges and of the 282 BJP MPs, 98 had criminal records; of the 44 Congress MPs, 8 had a criminal history. Among the regional parties, 100 per cent of the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) MPs have criminal charges against them, followed by Shiv Sena (83 per cent), Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) (80 per cent) and Communist Party of India (CPI-Marxist) (56 per cent)[15]. The 17th LS is no different, there are currently, 233 MPs (43per cent) facing criminal charges and of which 159 MPs (29per cent) have serious criminal charges[16].

Most of the MPs with criminal cases, if punished would lead to imprisonment for years or life; as a result, it is believed that most of the MPs with criminal background enter politics to use political power to manipulate investigations against them. Overall, the rich and criminal background has emerged as the winnability factor for any political party while choosing its candidates. Ironically, candidates having a criminal background does not also matter much for the common voters. As a result, candidates with limited assets and a clean track record are ignored both by the party high command and the common people, which in a way affects the image of the Parliament and its functioning in the long run.

Parliamentary morality has also declined since the 1990s. For instance, there were allegations against the P.V. Narasimha Rao-led Congress government to have bribed the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) MPs to win a confidence vote in the LS. The United Progressive Alliance (UPA)-I regime also had faced serious allegations of bribing the national and regional parties to survive the confidence vote on 22 July 2008, as the Left parties withdrew its support from the government over the Indo-US nuclear deal. In 2011, the image of Parliament hit an all-time low, with the leak of the taped conversations (recorded between May and July 2009) of lobbyist Nira Radia, who initially worked with the Tata Group and later with Mukesh Ambani (leading industrialist), which highlighted the role of the corporate sector in influencing the "news and views of free media and even in the allocation of ministerial portfolios in coalition governments"[17]. In addition, there are allegations against Modi government, some of its ministers and MPs for helping defaulters (accused of fraud and economic offences) like Vijay Mallya, Nirav Modi and Mehul Choksi to leave the

country.

SITTING DAYS AND TIME SPENT

Article 85 of the Constitution empowers the president to summon Parliament, but on the advice of the council of ministers. As a result, the government decides when a Parliament session will take place and oversees its functioning. More number of working days allows for more productive activity. But statistics show a sharp decline in the number of sitting days of Parliament, from an average of 120 days in a year between 1952 and 1972 to an average of 70 working days in recent decades[18]. The 1st LS met for an average of 150 days a year, and, between 1952–1967, the average sitting of the three LSs was 600 days (3700 hours)[19]. In contrast, the 15th LS from 2009–2013 met for 335 days (1329 hours)[20]. In the year 2004, the LS met for 48 sittings and the Rajya Sabha (RS) for 46, which was the worst record in that decade[21].

The main reason for such infrequent sittings was disruptions of parliamentary proceedings by the opposition parties when the government refuses to address what they regard as critical issues. The 15th LS witnessed serious disruption by the MPs, due to which, two sessions were lost without much productivity. As a result, the 15th LS had productivity of 61 per cent, which is the lowest in 60 years of parliamentary democracy[22]. The 16th LS, sat for 331 days (June 2014-Feb 2019), but spent 32 per cent (1,615 hr) of its time, which is 20 per cent more than the 15th LS, but 40 per cent lower than the average of all full-term LSs (2,689 hours)[23].

To ensure that Parliament meets for more number of days, the National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution (2002) pitched for a minimum number of 120 days and 100 days working days for the LS and the RS respectively. Furthermore, a private member's bill was introduced by Mahendra Mohan, a RS MP, to amend the Constitution for making a mandatory provision of minimum 120 working days, but it was opposed by the government[24]. Successive governments have not made efforts to build consensus on the fixed number of days for the Parliament to meet.

DISRUPTION: COMMON PHENOMENON

The forms of disruption include rushing to the well of the House; hurrying to the podium; staging sit-ins; using placards or distinctive dress; initiating walkouts; boycotting sessions; holding external demonstrations and even conducting a parallel assembly. Opposition parties justify obstructionism as a parliamentary strategy on the ground that the government is insensitive to their demands. Disruption has become a routine feature not just in India but in other countries like Taiwan, Japan and Ukraine. In the United Kingdom (UK), disruptions rarely occur and are mostly individual protests and the perpetrators are swiftly suspended as punishment for conducting such acts of remonstration[25].

In India a disruption happened in 1952 over the Preventive Detention (Amendment) Bill. In 1963 when the Official Languages Bill was introduced such acts were repeated, which a newspaper described as "disorderly scenes" in the House and two members, including Swami Rameshwaran of the Jan Sangh, had to be forcibly ejected by the ward staff[26]. In the same year, some members tried to disrupt a sacrosanct feature of the Parliament—the president's address to the two Houses. This was strongly disapproved by Nehru, who said, "This Parliament is supposed not only to act correctly but lay down certain principles and conventions of decorous behaviour"[27]. Subhash C. Kashyap points out, "The fourth Lok Sabha period may be remembered for the fundamental changes in the idiom, the style and culture of parliamentary politics. Hereafter, it was politics in the raw with much of masks and gloves off"[28]. Such disruptions have become frequent since the 1970s.

This type of disruptions has been viewed as a threat to the institutional reputation of Parliament and the functioning of parliamentary democracy[29]. The then Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee suggested that even walk-outs are preferable to disruptions: "the most effective way to oppose someone is a walkout…. It should be considered the highest form of opposition or antagonism. [But], no need for someone to jump into the well or beat their chest and scream slogans while addressing the parliamentary officer"[30].

The national political parties tend to use disruption as a tit-for-tat strategy. For example, during the UPA-I and II regimes, it was the BJP, sitting in the opposition, which was the main player in disrupting Parliament on various issues/scams such as 2G Spectrum and Commonwealth Games scams; allocation of coal blocks; Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the retail sector; demand for Telangana state and so on. Now, with the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government in power (2014-till date), it is the Congress along with its allies, with far fewer members in the LS, but significantly more in the RS, which has managed to stall the Parliament.

As a result, the LS monsoon session of 2010 (August-September) witnessed adjournments due to disruption on 17 out of the 19 days of actual sittings. The worst case was when 36 per cent of the allocated time in Parliament was lost in disruption in 2012[31]. In the RS, where the opposition parties were more in number than the present government, the monsoon session (July-August 2015) managed to work only for 9 per cent of its scheduled time due to disruptions. In the 16th LS, 16 per cent of the time was lost in disruption, and it was 37 per cent in the 15th LS and 13 per cent in the 14th LS and 36 per cent of the time wasted in disruptions in the in RS[32].

Furthermore, the disruptions are at times, directed towards the Speaker. The then Speaker Somnath Chatterjee argued that "disruptions and disrespect for the Speaker's authority are a disease of democracy"[33]. Disruptions have also affected question hour, which is a tool for the MPs to hold the government ministers accountable for the functioning of their ministers and it is the only plenary session in which legislators are not formally restricted by party oversight (whips) and where institutional rules are not heavily biased against opposition legislators. Ironically, disruptions have curtailed the significance of the question hour. For example, in 2012, 146 hours were allocated for question hour in both Houses, but only 57 hours (39 per cent) were used. Question hour was a washout in the RS during the winter sessions of 2010 and 2013[34]. In the 16th LS, the session in January was one of the least productive question hours, due to disruption and both the LS and RS lost a sixth and third of its time in disruption respectively[35]. Thus, the disruption of question hour impinges on the opportunity for MPs to hold government accountable for its actions.

The reasons for the increasing disruptions are: (a) Adherence to parliamentary norms gradually broke down from the 1970s, which was also the time the Congress lost its dominance and the composition of the House became more heterogeneous. This trend intensified in the late 1980s, with coalition politics becoming a reality, coupled with an increase in number of MPs from the Other Backward Classes (OBC), due to the Mandal Commission Report. (b) Though the Railway Budget and Union Budget were telecast live for the first time in 1992, it was from 2006 that the entire proceedings of the LS were telecast live by Doordarshan. As Devesh Kapur and Pratap Bhanu Mehta point out, "media gives greater coverage to MPs who engage in this behaviour than those who busy themselves in parliamentary debates … many MPs believe that publicity, even bad publicity, especially if it makes it to the evening news is better than no publicity[36] (c) At the same time, many politicians and MPs see parliamentary disruptions as an effective signal of representation; an indicator of a vibrant democracy; an imperative for elected representatives to air grievances and draw the attention of government on critical issues. Najma Heptullah, former Deputy Chairperson of the RS (1988–2004), emphasised that agitation was part of democracy and MPs were entitled to do so[37]. Even the late Union Finance Minister Arun Jaitley, then the Leader of the Opposition in the RS, justified disruption in the following words: "If parliamentary accountability is subverted and debate is intended to be used merely to put a lid on parliamentary accountability, it is then a legitimate tactic for the Opposition to expose the government through parliamentary instruments available at its command"[38]. (d) In the 15th LS around 38 parties and in the 17th LS (2019), 37 parties have been represented[39]. Thus, most the parties

got smaller allocation of time to speak during the debates, as a result, disruption became a common pheromone in the realm of stiff political competition. (e) It can be used by the MPs to attract public attention to the government's inability to act on a particular issue. At times, MPs tended to use the issues for personal advancement, rather than for public interest. (f) Furthermore, the prime minister should have the strength to win the support of the opposition parties. In the case of the present prime minister, Modi, his interventions have been few and rarely spontaneous or unscripted. For the entire monsoon session (July–August 2015) the parliament hardly functioned, and he was silent in the House. In contrast, Atal Bihari Vajpayee was more pro-active in engaging with the opposition MPs and enjoyed the cut and thrust of debate. There is absence of the sort of fodder that the leadership of a Nehru or Vajpayee provided for the opposition parties to disrupt the parliament[40]. (g) Generally, under Rule 374(A) of the General Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business, the Speaker has the power to eject and suspend members who disrupt proceedings. For instance, in 2013, 17 MPs and 12 MPs were suspended in the winter and monsoon sessions respectively. Sumitra Mahajan, LS Speaker, suspended 25 Congress MPs in August 2015 for five sessions. More recently, during the budget session (March 2020), the LS speaker Om Birla suspended seven Congress MPs for their unruly behaviour and disrespect to the chair as demonstrated by disrupting the proceeding with slogans and demanding the resignation of Amit Shah, the home minister for his inaction in preventing the Delhi violence (23-25 February 2020)[41]. But such disciplinary action, as in the past when MPs have been suspended, often proves counterproductive. In the current instance, it only served to unite the entire Opposition, which was prior to that ready to part ways with the Congress on its disruptive agenda[42].

DEBATING AND PASSING OF BILLS

Two vital functions of MPs are to scrutinise every piece of legislation that is introduced in both the Houses and in standing committees and debate the budget and demands for grants[43]. Unfortunately, the time spent in deliberating on the bills has witnessed a drastic decline. For instance, during the 1st LS, around 49 per cent of the total time was spent on debating legislation, but in the 2nd LS it was reduced to 28 per cent and in the 15th LS it was just 23 per cent[44]. This clearly indicates that bills are passed without much debate, leading to the introduction of weak public policies.

Apart from debating, passing of bills also reflects the constructive functioning of Parliament. For example, the 1st LS (1952-1957) around 333 bills were passed and since then every LS that completed three years has passed an average of 317 bills. Those LSs that lasted for less than three years have passed an average of 77 bills; the 6th LS had passed 130 bills, the 9th LS 63, the 11th LS 61, and the 12th LS 56[45]. The 13th and 14th LSs were able to pass only 297 and 248 bills

respectively, and the 15th LS was able to pass just 162 of the 291 bills that were introduced, which is an all-time low[46]. In the 16th LS, around 133 bills were passed, and most of them were related to the financial sector.

Passing of bills without much discussion or debate has also contributed to the decline in the functioning of the Parliament, like the highest number of bills passed in a single year was 118 in 1976, during the period of the Emergency[47]. In the 9th LS (1989–1991), 19 bills, including a constitutional amendment, were passed in one day (March 1991), without much debate and discussion[48]. Ironically, the lowest number of bills passed was just 18 in 2004, the year the UPA came to power. In 2012, around 11 bills were passed with less than 30 minutes of discussion and in the case of the RS, almost half of all bills were passed after a discussion lasting between one to two hours[49].

Bills that have vast implications for the public are also passed without much debate and discussion. For instance, eight bills were passed in 17 minutes in 2008. In the 15th LS, 35 per cent of the bills were passed after a debate of less than an hour, like the Protection of Women from Sexual Harassment at Work Place Bill, 2011, which was passed in just 20 minutes[50]. In December 2015, the 237th session of the RS ended with the passage of the Commercial Courts, Commercial Division and Commercial Appellate Division of High Courts Bill; the Arbitration and Conciliation (Amendment) Bill and Atomic Energy (Amendment) Bill without discussion[51]. Thus, on the face of it, Parliament has fallen short in discharging its constitutional duty of effectively scrutinising laws before passing them and overseeing the work of the government.

Similarly, scrutiny of the budget is a crucial task of Parliament, but "the time spent on discussing the budget has reduced from an average of 123 hours in 1950 to 39 hours in the last decade"[52]. In this context, the former RS Chairman, Mohammad Hamid Ansari, stated: "the raison d'etre of our existence is enacting legislation after due deliberation and ensuring the accountability of the executive. While much legislation has taken place in this session, the passing of legislative business in the din does no credit to our Parliament"[53]. According to PRS statistics, parliamentary standing committees generally take three to four weeks to review the demands for grants of the different ministries. Ironically, since decade, more than 95 per cent of these proposals were passed without much discussion. In 2014, the demands for grants (Rs.16.6 lakh crore) were passed without much discussion[54]. The 16th LS, passed 83 per cent of the budget without discussion; in case of the 2018–2019 budget, 100 per cent of the demands were passed without any discussion[55]. The Monsoon Session (August 2021) 14 bills were passed with just 10 minutes or less time spend on discussing these bills. This trend clearly indicates that debate and discussion on critical bills have been declining.

UNDERPERFORMING COMMITTEES?

The parliamentary committees are one of the key instruments for the effective functioning of the Parliament. It was only in 1993 that the department-related parliamentary standing committee was introduced. As the role and responsibility of the Parliament expanded and increased over the decades, it is difficult for the Parliament to scrutinise all the government policies and executive actions during the sessions and that too within a limited time. Hence, the parliamentary committees are assigned with the task of examining the proposed laws, policies and expenditure of the government and also evaluating a public petition on key policies[56]. In addition, if the committees have more time, they can call experts and stakeholders on several issues, for getting clarifications. As the committee members are based on the strength of individual parties, this provides scope for consensus building on national interest as there is no whip system in these committees.

Despite the parliamentary committee, known as 'mini parliament', there are many challenges that curtail its performance in the recent decades, such as: (a) Several important bills are passed without refereeing to the committees, i.e., over the decades the percentage of bills referred to the committee are declining; for example, in the 16th LS, only 25 per cent of the bills introduced were referred to the committees, which was less than those initiated in the 15th LS and 14th LS—71 per cent and 60 per cent respectively[57]. (b) At the same time, once the bills are referred to the committees, the number of sittings undertaken by these committees has also witnessed a declining trend, at least in the key departments like defence and home affairs. For example, the number of sittings in defence in the 14th LS, 15th LS and 16th LS has been 37, 15 and 12 and in home affairs 27, 24, and 15 respectively[58]. Moreover, not all the recommendations made by these committees are accepted by the government, like on an average the Public Accounts Committee made around 180 recommendations every year (2011–2018), of which only 80 per cent were accepted and the rest ignored by the government; so is the case with the Committee on Public Undertakings (COPU), only 67 per cent were accepted by the government[59]. (c) Sometimes the constitution of committees itself is delayed for a long period; as a result, the several bills in the sessions are passed without any scrutiny by the committees. For instances, in the first session of 17th LS (June-August 2019), 11 bills were passed without the scrutiny of the parliamentary standing committee, as the government was yet to complete the process of consultations with the parties to constitute the committees[60]. Generally, the process of constituting the committees takes a few months, like in 2014, the committees were notified on 1st September and during the UPA II, it was done on 31 August 2009[61]. But Modi government's second term took more time than required, due to which many bills bypassed committee scrutiny, which undermines the

parliamentary democracy. (d) Although the attendance of the MPs in the Parliament is not encouraging, this trend is also visible in committees as well. With the 24 and 8 committees administrated by LS and RS in the 16th LS, the average attendance of committee members (MPs) was just 49 per cent. The railways, petroleum and natural gas had the highest average of 55 per cent, and the lowest was External Affairs, at just 36 per cent [62]. This trend is continued in the 17th LS; around 95 MPs did not attend a single meeting of parliamentary standing committee that had the task to review allocation of different ministers post the presentation of the 2020–2021 Union Budget. Since September 2019, 100 MPs out of the 248 LS and eight panels in Rajya Sabha had skipped two or more meetings [63]. At the same time, several MPs had 100 per cent attendance in these panels. With advent of Covid-19 Pandemic, there is a growing demand from the MPs to hold the parliamentary committee meetings online, however the Vice-President, Venkaiah Naidu in May 2021 rejected the demand on that grounds that there is need for amendment to hold virtual parliamentary meetings. Nevertheless, the performances of committees are hindering the process of parliamentary democracy.

PRIVATE BILLS: LOW RATE OF SUCCESS

MPs also can introduce bills, known as private bills. Just 14 private member bills were passed from 1952 to 1970. In contrast, the British Parliament passed 17 private bills from 2010 to 2013. From time to time, MPs in India have been introducing private bills, but are unable to get them passed. For example, in the 10th LS (1991–1996), around 406 private member bills were initiated, but only 31 bills were discussed, and none were passed or even recommended to any parliamentary committees [64]. Similar during the 15th LS, around 372 private members' bills were introduced, of which only 22 were discussed, over 16 days spread over five years, which is not a healthy reflection of the parliamentary system in India [65]. Despite these odds, Tiruchi N. Siva, a DMK MP from Tamil Nadu, moved his bill for transgender rights in the RS, which was successfully passed and went on to become the historic Rights of Transgender Persons Bill, 2014. Interestingly, in the 16th LS, a total of 1,163 private bills were introduced, of which the majority were from BJP MPs, but none became law [66]. Similarly in August 2021, couple of BJP MPs from Uttar Pradesh planned to introduce a private bill on population control and Uniform civil code, but due to shortage of time, it was not tabled in the parliament. Thus, since the 1950s, only 15 private member bills have become law.

The reasons for this state of affairs are: (a) Although more than 3,000 bills were proposed or introduced, they did not become law; successive governments convinced/promised the MP that they would introduce a bill and postponed the proposals [67]. (b) Since only half a day is reserved in a week for private members' business, the majority of the private members' bills do not even come up for debate. Although this can easily be addressed by changing the rules of procedure of both Houses, so far nothing has moved in this regard. (c) Even if the debate is held, an MP does not press for his bill to be taken up for consideration and passing by the House. Instead of having the House decide whether the bill should be passed or not, by a voice vote or a recorded vote, the MP withdraws it at the request of the minister, without extracting an assurance from the minister that the government would introduce a similar bill at the earliest [68]. (d) Sometimes, the significant bills are defeated at the initial stage, thus denying it being introduced. For example, in 2015, MP Shashi Tharoor attempted to push for a bill on decriminalising homosexuality, but could not be introduced in the Parliament, as the BJP MP Nishikant Dubey forced it to be voted and was easily defeated. (e) In the UK, parties at times announce something called a "free vote", where the MPs are free to vote as they wish and are not controlled by party's whip. Former RS Chairman Hamid Ansari made a similar suggestion:

We need to build a political consensus so that the room for political and policy expression in Parliament for an individual member is expanded… the issuance of a whip could be limited to only those bills that could threaten the survival of a government, such as money bills or no-confidence motions. In other legislative and deliberative business of Parliament, this would enable members to exercise their judgement and articulate their opinion [69].

(e) It is also argued that many of the private bills introduced in any session seek to amend the Constitution, which requires two-thirds majority and without the prior consensus of political parties, the introduction of bills becomes meaningless. Thus, the strength of private bills is not capitalised by the Parliament and the ruling government. Nevertheless, bills do create awareness among the public, which strengthens the ethos of parliamentary democracy.

ORDINANCES: LIMITING THE POWERS OF THE LEGISLATURE

Article 123 of the Constitution grants the president certain law-making powers to promulgate ordinances when either of the two Houses of Parliament is not in session, though, they need to be approved in subsequent session. Successive governments from 1950s have issued ordinances, which amounts to the executive encroaching on legislature powers. For example, even the government led by the champion of parliamentary democracy, Jawaharlal Nehru, issued 32 ordinances. By 2013, 600 ordinances were promulgated: 61 during the Emergency period, 34 in 1993 under the Narasimha Rao government, 83 between 1996 and 1998 under the coalition government, 33 under the Vajpayee government (1999–2004), with half of the ordinances being reissued in 2000 alone, as it was not approved in parliament legislation [70]. Similarly, during the 15th LS, 28 ordinances

were promulgated even on critical issues like the Nirbhaya rape case (2012) and National Food Security (2013). In a few cases, ordinances were issued, despite a bill pending in the Parliament like the Criminal Laws (Amendment) Ordinance, 2010 and the National Food Security Ordinance, 2013. The 15th LS also saw the government re-promulgating ordinances when the original ordinance lapsed because it was not passed by Parliament like the Indian Medical Council (Amendment) Ordinance and the Readjustment of Representation of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in Parliamentary and Assembly Constituencies Ordinance, 2013[71]. During the 16th LS, 45 ordinances and in 2014–2015 alone nine were promulgated. The Modi Government had overall issued around 76 ordinances from (2014-2020), which is higher than the UPA-I and II regime (2004-2014), which had issued 61 ordinances. Thus, ordinances continue to be a vital tool for successive governments to achieve their own political interest.

Overall, despite the mixed performance in the functioning of Parliament and a widely prevailing debate that India needs to shift to the presidential form of government, it is important to continue with the parliamentary form of government and initiate measures to strengthen it. In this connection, K.R. Narayanan, the then President of India, rightly pointed out that "We have to consider whether it is the Constitution that has failed us or whether it is we who have failed the Constitution. Our experience of instability in government is perhaps not sufficient reason to discard the parliamentary system in favour of the presidential or any other system"[72].

The weakening of Parliament results in an accretion of disproportionate power in other institutions, upsetting the system of checks and balances and creates distortions which ultimately weaken the political system. To improve the functioning of Parliament, the following measures need to be taken.

- More number of sitting days and session in a year should be held for constructive debate and discussion in Parliament, which will not just strengthen the bills, but also give an opportunity for MPs from different parties to air their opinion and contribute in the parliamentary proceedings.
- Despite the fact that the MPs need to cater to the needs of their constituency, they should attend the sessions regularly. The number of MPs skipping sessions has been increasing. As a result, the MPs' contribution is limited, the problems of the constituency are not reflected, and government-introduced bills get passed without much scrutiny. It should be made compulsory for all MPs to attend the sessions, except for emergencies, so as to strengthen parliamentary functioning. The principle of 'No work, No pay' should be followed.
- The increasing indiscipline and unruly behaviour of MPs and the increasing tendency to disrupt the House

is the result of inadequate time allocated for MPs to raise the matters concerning their constituency and lack of strict action by the Speaker for this behaviour. As a result, MPs stalling proceedings has to be checked, by allotting more time for MPs to raise the critical issues and the Speaker should use the powers to punish the MPs involved in the disruption of the House, without bias and also deliberate on the recommendations of successive Committee of Ethics to prevent uncalled and unruly disruption.

- The Parliament should not have representatives with criminal or corrupt background, which tarnishes its image. Thus, voters should be educated to vote for candidates with a clean track record, which can be done by using the None of the Above (NOTA) option while voting and putting pressure on political parties not to nominate candidates who don't conform to the minimum standard of ethical consideration which are essential for the smooth functioning of the Parliament.

In a nutshell, the government, opposition parties and the MPs have a major responsibility in safeguarding decorum and the dignity of the Parliament as it is the highest forum of democracy that continues to provide opportunities for constructive debate and discussion on public policies. If effective measures are not initiated to prevent the drastic declining in the functioning of Parliament, it would not just be the failure of one of the institutions of democracy, but democracy itself.

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Journal of Contemporary Politics

Original Article

China's Belt and Road Initiative: An Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a signature foreign policy initiative by China's President Xi Jinping, is the largest global infrastructure undertaking, surpassing the Marshall Plan. Chinese banks and companies have invested billions in funding and building infrastructure in numerous countries. Two significant initiatives are related to and referred to the BRI. One is the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road (MSR). However, with the commencement, the initiative has attracted enormous global attention. Background information about SREB and the MSR and its implementation have been discussed in this article. This article highlights China's strategic considerations for the BRI and its significance to the country. This article additionally concentrates on the progress of BRI and how the West and China's neighbours view it and offers insight into the recently unfolding criticisms.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative; Silk Road Economic Belt; Maritime Silk Road; Xi Jinping

INTRODUCTION

Xi Jinping's China Dream aims for China's revitalization as a great power, focusing on economic prosperity, social stability, and a higher quality of life for its citizens. It includes policy objectives for expanding national power, modernizing the military, and promoting economic integration through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)[1]. BRI was introduced by President Xi Jinping in a speech he delivered at Nazarbayev University in Astana, Kazakhstan, in October 2013[2]. With the objective of reviving commercial, infrastructural, and transport ties and strengthening China's position in the world arena[3]. There is no obvious comparison for the BRI in scope or ambition. However, it has a history that dates back more than 2000 years to the great plan of the old Silk Road, which established trade routes between China and the Mediterranean and the heart of Europe under the Han

dynasty and was reviewed by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013 during China's economic transformation[4]. China's BRI is an ambitious infrastructure project linking East Asia and Europe. It has expanded to Africa, Oceania, and Latin America, broadening China's economic and political influence. At present 147 countries, comprising two-thirds of the world's population and 40% of global GDP, have signed on to the projects or expressed interest[5]. As a result, it surpasses the once-dominant Marshall Plan, which only amounted to $130 billion in modern terms, and is likely the greatest overseas investment push ever conducted by a single nation[6]. As it invests billions of dollars in infrastructure, the BRI is probably the most important development in the global economy in many years.

Two significant initiatives are related to and referred to the BRI. One is the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), which was put out by Chinese President Xi Jinping in September 2013 while he was visiting Kazakhstan. The other is when

Xi advocated for creating the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) on his visit to Indonesia in October 2013[7]. The initiative was also mentioned in China's 13th five-year plan, in October 2017, and included in the Chinese Communist Party's Constitution, an entirely unprecedented honour for a foreign policy or infrastructure initiative. As a result, it is likely to persuade foreign nations to engage with the Belt and Road if they want to engage with China[8]. The 'Belt' will connect Xingjian, Xian, Central Asia, Rotterdam, Moscow, and Venice by way of an inter-regional network of rail and overland roads, oil and gas pipelines, and power grids. Through a network of seaports, 'Road' seeks to link China with South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Africa, and the Mediterranean. China hopes to connect South Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and the Asia Pacific by tying together a web of institutions and countries with the support of BRI[9].

- **The Belt :** The SREB has three routes on land, one from Northeast and Northwest China, via Central Asia and Russia, to Europe and the Baltic Sea; one from Northwest China, via Central Asia and West Asia, to the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea; and one from Southwest China, via the Indochina Peninsula, to the Indian Ocean[7]. These three routes are divided into six economic corridors[4].

1. New Eurasian Land Bridge, from Western China to Western Russia through Kazakhstan.
2. China–Mongolia–Russia Corridor, running from Northern China to Eastern Russia.
3. China–Central Asia–West Asia Corridor, running from Western China to Turkey.
4. China–Indochina Peninsula Corridor, running from Southern China to Singapore.
5. China Myanmar–Bangladesh–India Corridor, running from Southern China to Myanmar.
6. China–Pakistan Corridor, from South-Western China to Pakistan.

The SREB is crucial to Xi Jinping's "neighbourhood diplomacy" by improving relations with countries on China's periphery through public goods like transport links and power infrastructure. It is the largest terrestrial component of the BRI program, which aims to invest up to $1 trillion in new transport and trade infrastructure. The SREB aims to provide alternative import/export and energy supply routes and reduce China's dependence on South-East Asia shipping lanes. China's principal focus in the area is the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, which is strategically important due to its proximity to eight other countries, with fifteen dry ports, and a wealth of natural resources[10].

- **The Road:** Chinese President Xi Jinping presented the notion of MSR in October 2013 in a speech to the Indonesian parliament as part of his trip to the APEC forum of economic leaders[11]. Xi announced that China would invest in port construction around the Indian Ocean, from Southeast Asia all the way to East Africa and portions of Europe, to handle growing maritime trade flow[4]. Maritime commerce is the main driver of China's national economy, accounting for about 90% of the country's total foreign trade in terms of volume and around 60% of it in terms of value. The Road was designed to work in conjunction with the ASEAN when it was first introduced in October 2013[12].

However, the geographic extent of MSR was not specified. Sixteen months later, in the first official Road document "Visions and Actions", with a larger marine focus that included the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), the South Pacific, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Atlantic[11]. Two MSR route options were put forward in the Vision and Actions document. First, starting from China's coast via the South China Sea to the South Pacific would be the East Route. Second, the South China Sea would be a part of the West Route's route, which would reach Africa and Europe. A 2017 paper titled "Vision for Maritime Cooperation" under the BRI made a small modification to this plan by proposing three distinct routes. First, the China-Indian Ocean-Africa-Mediterranean Sea Blue Economic Passage connecting the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which runs westward from the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean. Second, the South China Sea to the Pacific Ocean, Oceania, and the South Pacific. Another route is also imagined, one that uses the Arctic Ocean to ascend to Europe[7]. The MSR and the SREB currently each include three routes, in perfect symmetry.

Progress and Execution of BRI

The BRI, initially launched to connect Central, South, and Southeast Asia with China, has grown significantly. In 2015, 17 countries joined, and in 2017, it was extended to Latin America through MSR[13]. China hosted three BRI Forums in 2017, 2019, and 2023, attracting world leaders and signing numerous agreements. At its tenth anniversary, the Chinese government announced over 150 countries and 30 international organizations have embraced BRI, with 3,000 projects valued at $1 trillion currently underway worldwide[14].

As of August 2022, 52 African nations have ratified agreements or understandings related to BRI, according to China's official BRI website[15]. Africa is a crucial part of BRI due to its potential for rails, roads, and energy. Infrastructure remains a significant barrier to development, with only 43% of Africans having electricity, 48% having paved roads, and 6% having irrigated land. China's investment in East

Africa began due to its ports and rail infrastructure needs. It has since expanded to other countries, including major road infrastructure projects from south to north Africa, such as Mozambique's Maputo-Katembe bridge and Algeria's Cherchell Ring Expressway Project. Since 2000, China's investments in Africa have significantly increased, reaching US$23 billion in 2020. As the largest funder of infrastructure projects in Africa, China financially supports around a fifth of all projects and constructing a third. McKinsey & Company report estimates over 10,000 Chinese-owned firms operating in Africa, with 90% privately owned. Chinese investment has positively impacted Africa, but growing debt has led some states to reassess their plans. East African countries have borrowed over $29 billion from China for projects, with Djibouti, Kenya, and Uganda having issued warnings due to the Magampura Mahinda Rajapaksa Port (Hambantota port) transfer in Sri Lanka[16].

Central Asia's five countries -Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, are crucial to BRI, with 261 projects identified with minimum investment exceeding US$136 million[17]. Kazakhstan invested $30 billion in infrastructure development, transport, and logistics as part of BRI in April 2019. The Western Europe-Western China intercontinental highway connects Europe and China through Russia and Kazakhstan, potentially earning $5 billion annually in transit fees[18]. Kyrgyzstan's commitment to BRI projects from 2011-2017 amounted to US $4.1 billion. However, only created 0.1-0.3% of the country's total employment, creating only several thousand jobs. According to various scholars, the debt repayment burden may affect Kyrgyzstan. However, Kyrgyzstan can benefit greatly from BRI if tax legislation is well-managed, particularly in manufacturing and transit projects[19]. For Uzbekistan, BRI is a potential avenue for expanding commercial and trade routes, particularly in the Persian Gulf. Uzbekistan and China signed 115 deals worth over $23 billion in 2017, enhancing cooperation in various sectors. In 2019, Uzbekistan established a government group to align its development plan with China's BRI ambitions. With over 1,500 Chinese businesses in its territory, China-Uzbekistan trade surged 48.4% in 2018, reaching $6.26 billion[20].

Importance of BRI for China and China's Strategic Thinking

Through BRI China is focusing on strengthening its geo-economic resilience to threats affecting its socio-economic stability and regime security, following trade and tariff disputes with the US. This is in response to potential economic or diplomatic isolation imposed by the USA in the 1950s and 1990s, and to maintain its socio-economic stability and regime security[11]. China faces challenges such as an aging population, a shrinking workforce, environmental and health concerns, and evolving global protectionism. Despite reducing poverty over 30 years,

inequality remains[21]. China's food security is crucial for domestic stability, with a population of 1.4 billion. Imports from China have increased from 3.2% in 2006 to 6.3% in 2016, with 43% passing through the Malacca Strait and 39% through the Panama Canal. Improving resilience is essential for China's food security, which can be achieved through BRI[11].

China's oil imports, which accounted for 80% of its imports in 2016, primarily pass through the Indian Ocean and Malacca Strait into the South China Sea[7]. As the world's largest crude oil importer, China will need to import around 80% of its oil by 2035, compared to 64% in 2016[11]. The Malacca Strait, which passes through China's transit routes, is a critically vulnerable that could be cut off in case of a maritime crisis or war which is also popularly known as the "Malacca Dilemma" for China[7]. China's strategic initiative to take control of the Asia-Pacific by expanding its influence over neighbouring nations, solving its "Malacca Dilemma," and creating new ports with the capacity to serve both military and economic needs[22]. The BRI has come to symbolise an aggressive China with the capacity and desire to transform both the political and economic landscape of the world.

To facilitate the transportation of exports and imports to and from China, China has purposefully funded significant continental transportation infrastructure development projects, such as the Suez Canal in Egypt, the Panama Canal, the Gwadar Sea Port in Pakistan, the Port of Trinidad and Tobago, and coastal ports along the African continent. China's choice to invest in and exert control over major global distribution and navigational choke-points, such as the Malaccan Strait in the Indian Ocean, the Gulf of Hormuz in the Middle East, the Suez Canal, the Panama Canal, and the Straight of Bab el-Maneb on the east coast of Africa, is distinctive to the BRI strategy[23]. China's global investments in the Panama Canal expansion, Venezuelan ports shipping lanes, and South American transportation systems demonstrate its influence on the global commercial supply chain entry/exit points, allowing it to weaponize the supply chain for a competitive commercial advantage. China's construction of ports in Pakistan and Sri Lanka enhances its ability to protect Sea Lanes of Communications (SLOCs), increase its presence, and gain prestige. Gwadar Port in Pakistan provides a key Arabian Sea port, while Sri Lanka's ports are vital assets in the Indian Ocean[13].

How does the West and neighbours look at BRI?

The BRI was launched by China to facilitate cross-continent trade, geo-economic integration, and global prosperity. The initiative unifies China's external and domestic policies, aiming to rewire the global political economy and move China from a "game player" to a "game maker."[24] This shift aligns with China's shift in foreign policy from maintaining a low profile to striving for achievement. The

BRI challenges Western economic development models, focusing on structural reforms and technical assistance in education and health, but excluding public infrastructure. The Chinese government aims for state-led, credit-driven infrastructure investments to stimulate regional economic growth[9]. Success could lead to a new international order with China as a leading player. China's BRI narrative portrays it as a great power capable of shaping the international system. Under Xi's presidency, China has promoted the BRI as a grand strategy to challenge US hegemony. This desire for leadership is realistic, given the erosion of US political and economic power and China's rising capabilities[23]. The current trade dispute between China and the US will affect BRI nations in different ways. According to recent trade data, China has widened its commercial ties with countries taking part in the BRI in an effort to make up for decreased commerce with the US. The rising demand for agricultural imports entering China appears to be particularly advantageous for BRI nations in Latin America and Africa. Similar to this, some Chinese businesses are shifting their production to BRI nations like Vietnam to escape the effects of tariffs. However, this has also led to heightened US scrutiny of product sources. The Trump administration-imposed tariffs on Vietnamese steel and aluminium in May 2019, stressing the fact that China was using Vietnam as a way to avoid paying taxes[25].

President Xi's "project of the century" have received mixed reactions among its neighbours. Countries like Pakistan, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar and the Central Asian Republics have engaged the BRI. However, countries like Japan, South Korea, Australia and India have been suspicious in engaging the BRI. India has viewed the BRI suspiciously ever since it was announced. In May 2017, India declined Beijing's offer to attend the first-ever Belt and Road Forum. Rather, it has made direct remarks on debt loads and transparency. To sum up, India has not attended the second Belt and Road Forum. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a portion of the BRI that passes through the disputed region of Kashmir, is the main source of contention for India. The BRI is seen by India as an infringement on its geographical integrity and sovereignty[26].

China has implemented its 2050 grand plan built on the BRI and exploited smart power to seize economic domination in the world after being admitted to the World Trade Organisation. Countries opposed to BRI allege that BRI aims to militarise the world's supply system. China has positioned itself to achieve worldwide economic supremacy through its innovative commercial strategies and pursuit of influencing the lines of distribution on the global market[27]. China's establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2016, a Beijing-based developing bank, has been viewed with skepticism and as a threat to the liberal order[24]. The bank is seen as a means for China to influence international norms and values. Concerns include providing loans for projects in unstable states and high risk of non-payment. The creation of the AIIB was driven by dissatisfaction with existing international financial institution's governance and fears of China using it for political and economic purposes, including disposing of excess State-Owned Enterprises (SOE) capacity through BRI projects[21]. The USA exhibited skepticism, urging other states to avoid joining the AIIB and promoting the idea that the AIIB would not meet international standards[24].

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has gained significant diplomatic and geopolitical influence for China in the Global South[22]. The West is seeking alternative infrastructure investments, such as the Blue Dot Network (BDN) launched in 2019 by the US, Japan, and Australia. The Build Back Better World (B3W) initiative by the G7 countries in 2021, later renamed as Partnership for Global Infrastructure Investment (PGII), aims to support infrastructure development in democratic low- and middle-income countries. The European Union's Global Gateway, aiming to mobilize USD300 billion between 2021 and 2027, focuses on renewable energy, IT infrastructure, and resilient critical minerals supply chains. The US announced the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) in 2023 at the G20 summit[28].

BRI and it's Unfolding Criticisms

It is clear that China through BRI is receiving unfavourable responses as a new colonial power. On the term for its foreign policy strategy that is debt imperialism[29]. The most often voiced concern is China's exploitation of market and debt traps to influence international relations to its advantage through fostering reliance in BRI member countries. The debt of more than half the nations listed under BRI is not graded due to domestic political and economic difficulties. Many of these nations are susceptible to dependence and economic pressure since they have few choices[21]. For example, China provided $4.8 billion in infrastructure development loans to Sri Lanka, including $1.3 billion for Port Hambantota modernization, as part of its BRI strategy. However, after paying over $300 million in interest, Sri Lanka defaulted and negotiated a 99-year lease with China, allowing China to manage port activities. China eventually wrote off the Sri Lanka debt, demonstrating its smart power and strategic financial tactics for a competitive global market and distribution advantage[23]. The COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine have led to a surge in low-income BRI countries struggling to repay loans, resulting in debt crises and criticism. Other examples like, Pakistan's widening budget deficit led to an IMF bailout, while Ghana and Zambia's sovereign defaults were partly due to BRI loans[4].

Despite its lavish organization, the BRI has faced issues with failing proposed deals. For instance, talks with Thailand over a 3,000 km high-speed rail line from Kunming to

Singapore have stalled. The Thai government plans to build only part of the project and finance it themselves. Other failures include Zhongda China Petrol's oil refinery in Kara-Balta, Kyrgyzstan [5]. India declined the Qingdao Declaration's support for BRI due to concerns about China's handling of the Hambantota port. Malaysia suspended and canceled BRI projects worth about US $ 243.5 million due to lopsided Chinese contracts in 2019, while Nepal halted plans for a Chinese company to build a hydroelectric plant, instead using internal resources [25].

CONCLUSION

China's vast land borders and claims over the sea have sparked tensions with neighbouring countries like Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam. China's amphibious expansion has raised concerns among these nations, potentially hindering the progress of the BRI, as the security dynamics between China and its neighbours deteriorate. The BRI faces a challenge to reposition due to the decline in US-China ties, strategic competition, security deterioration, global trade, and economic instability, new partnerships, focus on technology and supply chain resilience, and trust. China's domestic economic problems and 60 percent of its loans in debt-distressed countries may increase demands for waivers or restructuring [30].

The BRI is a significant long-term project with a period of 30-40 years required to complete and worth approximately $20 trillion [31], aiming to promote regional connectivity and economic growth in participating countries. However, the initiative faces challenges such as debt sustainability and the impact of China's economic slowdown. The slowdown has led to increased scrutiny of China's overseas investments, including those under the BRI, affecting the pace of projects. Some projects have been delayed or put on hold, and China has become more cautious about new investments. Concerns about the financial sustainability and social and environmental impact of the infrastructure projects, making it harder for China to gain the support and cooperation of host countries, crucial for the BRI's success. The speed at which China's economy recovers, the degree of debt sustainability of BRI projects, and the geopolitical environment in which the initiative is implemented will all influence the outcome of BRI. Despite potential short-term difficulties, China's long-term economic and foreign policy goals are likely to keep the BRI as a focal point.

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Journal of Contemporary Politics

Research Article

India's Rohingya Dilemma: Crisis and Resolution

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ABSTRACT

While the Rohingya issue has become a grave socio-economic and security concern with cross-regional implications, India has not been able to make its stance clear yet. India is facing a very unique situation where most of the political parties, particularly the opposition parties are not unanimous with the ruling party on the Rohingya issue. Rohingyas becoming a serious threat to India's society, economy and environment. In a short period, the issue of a humanitarian crisis has become a grave security threat for India. Though the issue is so sensitive from the point of security view, there is no unanimity among political parties, civil society groups, think tanks, and decision-making circles. Even after the Supreme Court of India rejected the plea of Rohingyas and their supporters to lobby against repatriation the government is unable to send back Rohingyas to their place of origin in Myanmar. The recent Intel reports are warning about Rohingyas cross border links with several subversive groups across the region. Terrorist groups have now started exploiting their plights. The paper tries to discuss and evaluate critically New Delhi's approaches towards Rohingyas. The paper will also understand how, being a mature democracy, champion of human rights, and love for diversity, India addresses the situation delicately in a time-bound manner before it goes out of hand.

Keywords: Rohingya; Security; Threat; Myanmar; Rakhine; Terrorism; Refugees

INTRODUCTION

While the Rohingya issue has become a grave socio-economic and security concern with cross-regional implications, India has not been able to make its stance clear yet. The 8th April 2021 order by the Supreme Court (SC) of India's on the Rohingya deportation has started a fresh debate among common citizens, civil society groups, and political parties in India[1]. It has put the government in a state of huge dilemma in addressing the issue. The order states that the government can deport Rohingya immigrants to Myanmar only after following prescribed procedures for ensuring the safety and chances of survival in their place of origin[2]. While the government wants to deport the illegal migrants to their home country with dignity, certain groups of Indian intellectuals and political parties strongly oppose the deportation on humanitarian grounds and appeasement per se. The situation has put India in an awkward position because the country is not unanimous on such a serious matter[3].

ISSUES AND CONCERNS

The issue is connected with Myanmar and Bangladesh, two vital neighbours of India on the one hand and the UN on the other[4]. Amid bearing the burden of 20 million illegal Bangladeshis,[5] the Home Ministry of India has reported in the Indian Parliament (December 2017) that more than 40,000 Rohingya are staying illegally in India, which differs from the private estimate of many more[6]. But the most important thing is that there are 7 million more Rohingyas detained in the refugee camps in Bangladesh and waiting to cross over to India, while many more are coming directly from Myanmar[7].

Due to a series of conflicts between Buddhists and Rohingyas since historical times, particularly in the wake of

the 2017 debacle, nearly 10 million Rohingyas have fled to other countries, mostly Bangladesh, Thailand, and Malesia[8]. Also, a sizeable number has come to India and settled in various parts of the country. The worry is their fast-rising number[9]. The situation has attracted many socio-economic, political, and security problems in the hosting countries. Their plight has been exploited by many subversive groups with the help of some regional and extra-regional powers[10].

The socio-political and economic security situation in India is becoming aggravated day by day. It has become a complex challenge for India as a democratic country with a strong commitment to secularism, equality, and human rights[11]. There has been strong opposition, for the sake of political appeasement, to any measure taken by the government to manage these illegal immigrants in India[12]. In addition, besides political and security, these illegal migrants are slowly becoming an economic burden for the country[13]. The politico-security implications of Rohingyas are clearly visible in Jammu and Kashmir, West Bengal, and Kerala. Their number is rising faster in other states, including national and state capitals[14].

While the International Court of Justice (ICJ) has strictly instructed Myanmar to take all the necessary measures to protect the lives and properties of Rohingyas[15], the SC in India expects the government to ensure their safe return and survival chances in the home country before the deportation[16]. However, in the meantime, the administration in Myanmar has changed again[17].

DOUBLE WORRY

India is equally concerned about Bangladesh's difficulty detaining millions of Rohingyas, seriously threatening its economy and environment[18]. Although Bangladesh has managed it so far, it won't be able to do so for a long time. Therefore, India worries about how far Bangladesh can hold these Rohingyas in refugee camps[19]. Although the relationship between India and Bangladesh has been cordial, the situation has reached its threshold. There is a strong chance that Bangladesh could unleash many of these refugees under the pressure of radicals and the country's economic stress. And possibly, they would sneak into India[20]. This is also true that Bangladesh has never accepted the illegal presence of its citizens in India[21].

While no Muslim country, including the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), has not come forward with a robust strategy to resolve the crisis, Bangladesh has requested India's assistance to resolve the issue and help find a permanent solution[22]. Through regular deliberations, India also trusts Bangladesh to maintain its statuesque till a permanent solution is made. But the truth is that a country (Bangladesh) already facing difficulties feeding its citizens wouldn't be able to manage 7 million refugees[23].

SECURITY CONCERNS

Another reality is the spreading of terror networks in the region emerging from this crisis[24]. The situation in Rakhine has been exploited by the terrorist-jihadist groups based in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan[25]. The Aqa-Mul-Mujahideen linked with Pakistan-based Harkat-ul-Jihad Islami Arakan and Inter-service Intelligence (ISI) are mainly responsible for instigating the Rohingya Muslims against Buddhists in Myanmar[26], though Rohingya Solidarity Organization, The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, and Arakan Army, etc. For geostrategic, geoeconomic, and geopolitical reasons, China has been helping/supplying these militant groups with high-quality, sophisticated weapons and missiles[27]. Intel reports have also verified that some new jihadist/terror/insurgent groups have come up along the Myanmar borders with India and Bangladesh, viz., Lungi-clad, Kuki-Chin, and the Kachin Independence Army[28]. India has been trying hard to ensure that the radicalisation of the Arakan corridor does not emerge as the new terror-jihadi flashpoint that can directly impact its maritime security in the Bay of Bengal and the venerable northeastern region[29].

Intel reports that many Rohingyas were found involved in anti-national activities in India, and they have links with terror and other extremist groups such as ISI and Islamic States[30]. Similar information was submitted to the SC in 2017 by the Government of India. There are also allegations that the anti-Hindu violence in the post-2021 state elections in West Bengal and communal riots in the National Capital, in the last few years, found Rohingyas and Bangladeshis were involved[31]. Allegedly, in a fraction of time, the Rohingya problem, from a humanitarian crisis, has become a grave security issue for India.

INDIA'S DILEMMA

In the meantime, the government of India faces a unique situation of pressure from the judiciary, opposition parties, a faction of civil society groups, and the international community in various ways[32]. While the SC and ICJ have advised taking appropriate and humanitarian approaches in the Rohingyas matter, some political parties and civil society groups in India are pressurising the government to maintain the status quo. Due to differences in opinion, the issue has become more complex. Therefore, a minor error or political miscalculation would cost the government much, particularly in a critical situation where national and state elections are around the corner.

To solve the problem, India needs to understand the behaviour of all the stakeholders and the strategy under which they are acting. To reach out for a permanent political solution, India needs to take the concerns and compulsions of Bangladesh and Myanmar into confidence[33]. Both countries also play a vital role in India's strategic calculations[34]. The geostrategic and geoeconomic importance of both

countries can affect India's national, regional, and broader Indo-Pacific strategy. Both countries hold great potential for peace and prosperity in India's northeast region.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Nevertheless, being one of the most powerful countries in the region and an aspiring global power, India has a moral responsibility to facilitate a permanent solution in this regard[35]. Besides the best diplomatic channels, India should use its good relationship with Myanmar and facilitate the return of the displaced people to their homeland[36]. Myanmar also understands India's strategic and economic importance in the post-COVID-19 world[37]. When, for strategic reasons, China is trying hard to mediate the crisis, Myanmar realises India, being a mature democracy, could be the best peace-maker[38]. India has already provided huge developmental aid (US $25 million) and financial assistance for Myanmar (Rakhine) and Bangladesh[39].

However, the government of India needs to take an appropriate and time-bound action plan taking all the stakeholders, domestic, regional, and international, on board[40]. India must use its best diplomatic tactics to address the situation before it goes out of its hands. The strategy should aim to comply with India's security imperatives and respect the concerns of crucial allies while guaranteeing the survival and dignity of the homeless.

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ABOUT THE DEPARTMENT

The Department was established in July 1973 by Prof. K. H. Cheluva Raju, with the support of Dr. H. Narasimhaiah, the then Vice-Chancellor of Bangalore University. Dr. Cheluva Raju served as Professor and Chairman till 1987 and went on to become the Vice-Chancellor of Gulbarga University from 1987-1990. Since then, the department has had qualified faculty members, who have carried forward the legacy and values established by Prof. K. H. Cheluva Raju. they include Prof. Narayana, Prof. R.L.M. Patil, Prof. M.G. Krishnan, Prof. P. S. Jayaramu, Prof. D. Jeevan Kumar, Prof. Sandeep Shastri, Prof. Meena Deshpande, Prof. M.J. Vinod and Prof. P. Ramanna.

Since its inception, the Department has promoted critical inquiry and exchange of ideas. It strives to remove barriers in higher education and motivate students in realizing their potential through creative spaces. It promotes inter-disciplinary research and tie-ups with civil society and industry, with the intention of facilitating placement of students. Presently, the department consists of three Professors. Prof. Veena Devi, Prof. M. Narasimhamurthy, and Prof. S. Y. Surendra Kumar

At present there are 120 P.G. Students and 32 Ph.D. scholars (two foreign students) pursuing their studies.