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ABOUT THE JOURNAL

Policy and Governance Journal is a peer-reviewed, triannual journal published by the Center of Policy Research and Governance (CPRG) and is dedicated to furthering scholarly engagements and creating a citizen-centric public policy discourse. It encourages a multidisciplinary approach to explore a diverse range of subjects that cut across the economy, public policy, governance, diplomacy, social justice, and environmental concerns.

All articles of PGJ adhere to a rigorous review policy wherein all manuscripts are reviewed initially by the senior editor(s), and only those papers that align with the themes and fit within the scope of the journal are sent for peer review. While Policy and Governance Journal is an in-house journal of CPRG, the views expressed in the journal are the sole responsibility of the individual authors and not that of the organisation.

Policy and Governance Journal

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EDITOR'S NOTE

This issue of the Policy and Governance Journal arrives at a moment when questions of equity, sustainability, and institutional relevance are increasingly at the forefront of policy debates- both in India and beyond. As with our earlier volumes, this edition seeks to foreground scholarship that does not merely comment on public policy but interrogates its assumptions, frameworks, and social consequences.

The articles featured here reflect a broad canvas. From corporate social responsibility initiatives aimed at enhancing women's livelihoods, to the recalibration of evaluation mechanisms in climate-conflict intersections; from federal complexities in environmental governance, to evolving skill demands in an age of technological flux- the contributions speak to a shared concern with systems in transition. Equally significant are the essays exploring the cultural and emotional dimensions of policy: a field report on informal governance at religious congregations, and a suite of book reviews that draw attention to generational mental health, ecological ethics, and spectral histories in Indian writing.

Together, these pieces offer a window into the richness of public life, where policy meets practice, data meets memory, and institutions encounter lived experience. They do not always agree in method or message, but they do collectively signal the value of sustained and serious inquiry in times of rapid change.

We thank the contributors, reviewers, and editorial advisors who have helped shape this volume. It is our hope that readers, whether scholars, practitioners, or simply the curious- find in these pages both provocation and possibility.

Dr Ramanand
Editor in Chief
Center of Policy Research and Governance

RESEARCH ARTICLES

CLIMATE GOVERNANCE IN INDIA'S FEDERAL FRAMEWORK: NAVIGATING CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Naina Sharma* and Supriya Kaushik**

ABSTRACT

India is one of the countries most affected by climate change. From extreme heat waves and floods to rising sea levels and crop failures, the risks are increasing every year. At the same time, India is also a federal country, which presents both opportunities and complexities in formulating cohesive climate policies. This paper delves into the intricacies of India's federal system, highlighting how the absence of a unified national climate law and the dispersion of sectoral responsibilities across various government levels restrict the development of a synchronized response to climate crises. Through an analysis of constitutional and legal frameworks, and existing mechanisms for intergovernmental coordination, the study identifies critical gaps that hinder effective climate action, particularly at the state level. Conversely, the research showcases exemplary initiatives by certain states, underscoring the potential of subnational entities in driving climate innovation. These cases illustrate the capacity of states to tailor climate strategies to local contexts, thereby contributing meaningfully to national objectives. The paper advocates for the enactment of a comprehensive national climate legislation that delineates clear roles and responsibilities while granting states the autonomy to address region-specific climate challenges. By aligning national vision with localized action India can foster a resilient and inclusive climate governance model that leverages leverages the strengths of its federal framework.

INTRODUCTION

Climate change is no longer a distant concern, it is already here and growing more severe each year. India is among the countries most at risk, despite contributing little to global greenhouse gas emissions. The Climate Risk Index 2025, for instance, stated that India ranks sixth among the most affected countries between 1993 and 2022, despite improving its short-term position to 49th in 2022. This worrying trend was reinforced in the Economic Survey 2025, which mentioned India as the seventh most vulnerable country to climate change. This is reflected in the increasing number of extreme weather events. These events include both sudden disasters - like floods, cyclones, and heatwaves - as well as slower changes such as rising sea levels, loss of biodiversity, and worsening water insecurity. In 2024, India experienced such events on 322 out of 366 days - an increase from 318 days in 2023 and 314 days in 2022. That means nearly 88% of the year saw at least one part of the country dealing with an extreme weather incident (Sengupta & Pandey, 2025). All of this puts additional stress on a developing country like India, which already struggles to strike a balance between economic growth and environmental protection. This growing climate vulnerability makes it clear that strong, coordinated action is a necessity. Commensurate with the rising concerns around climate change at the global level, India has made several key commitments. At the COP26 summit in Glasgow, the country announced its Panchamrit Strategy, a five-point action plan that

includes increasing non-fossil energy capacity to 500 GW, meeting 50% of energy requirements through renewables, reducing total projected carbon emissions by 1 billion tonnes, lowering the economy's emissions intensity by 45%, and achieving net-zero by 2070 (MoEFCC, 2022). Additionally, in line with the Paris Agreement, India has also regularly submitted updated Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), outlining its plans for emissions reduction, renewable energy targets, and climate adaptation efforts over the coming years (MoEFCC, 2022).

Despite India's strong international climate commitments, domestic initiatives often fall short of that same level of ambition. This disconnect is especially evident in the political arena. Climate change featured in the election manifestos of major national parties for the first time only in 2019. Even ahead of the 2024 general elections, while the manifestos included several environment-related promises - such as targets for renewable energy and measures to control pollution - the term "climate" was scarcely mentioned in either document. This gap suggests that while India remains active in climate diplomacy, climate action has yet to find a strong foothold in national political discourse.

As Sinha (2022) observed, despite the increasing severity of air pollution and climate-related hazards, elections in India have not evolved into platforms where these critical issues are meaningfully debated. The mismatch between international ambition and domestic urgency highlights the pressing need for more cohesive and integrated climate leadership at the national level.

ENVIRONMENTAL FEDERALISM AND CLIMATE GOVERNANCE IN INDIA

Environmental federalism is the notion of how responsibility for environmental governance is shared between the Centre, states, and local bodies. It explores which level of government is best suited to perform particular environmental functions, such as setting pollution standards, managing forests, or developing local adaptation plans (Shobe & Burtraw, 2012). Close to this concept is the idea of climate governance, which refers to how institutions at different levels of government, from the Union to states to local bodies, make and implement decisions to address climate change. It goes beyond policies and laws to include institutions, finance, coordination mechanisms, and the integration of climate goals into various sectors like energy, transport, and agriculture (Dubash & Sridhar, 2022). However, in India, climate governance has largely evolved through executive-led policy instruments such as the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) and sectoral laws like the Energy Conservation Act (2001) or the Electricity Act (2003). The central government has repeatedly relied on Article 253 - that allows the centre to legislate on subjects in the State List to fulfil international agreements - to justify the passage of key environmental laws like the Environment Protection Act (1986), resulting in a centralisation of environmental authority (Chakrabarti, 2015). This growing use of international treaty commitments - such as those under the UNFCCC, Stockholm, and Rio frameworks - as constitutional justification has led to a de facto centralisation of climate policy--making. As Nayak (2017) argues, this marks a -

making shift away from cooperative federalism toward a model where global legal obligations are used to concentrate power at the Centre. However, states have constitutional responsibility over key sectors like agriculture, local governance, and water, all of which are highly climate sensitive. This raises concerns of overlapping jurisdiction in climate governance and action.

The principle of subsidiarity - that decisions should be made at the level closest to the citizen - supports the case for decentralised environmental management. Local governments, being most affected by climate impacts, must have the capacity and resources to act. Yet, financial power and legislative authority remain skewed in favour of the Centre, often creating coordination gaps, fund delays, and implementation bottlenecks at the state level (Pillai & Dubash, 2021). The concept of compensatory climate governance helps explain this dynamic. It describes how states, despite limited power, often compensate for central inaction or overreach by tailoring policies to local needs and experimenting with innovative solutions that later shape national policy. In this sense, environmental federalism in India is both a challenge and an opportunity. If coordinated well, it can promote region specific climate actions, decentralised innovation, and accountability while ensuring national climate goals are met (Shobe & Burtraw, 2012; Pillai & Dubash, 2021).

Another challenge in this discourse is that although the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) leads climate policy, it has limited capacity for coordination across ministries. Institutions like the Prime Minister's Council on Climate Change (PMCCC) and the Apex Committee for the Implementation of the Paris Agreement (AIPA) have also struggled to facilitate regular horizontal collaboration and sustained vertical coordination among the Centre, States, and local governments (Singh & Kolluri, 2025).

Thus, India needs institutional reforms that promote inter-ministerial alignment at the central level, stronger engagement with state governments, and formalised coordination frameworks to ensure climate goals are achieved consistently across all levels of governance (Dubash & Sridhar, 2022; Singh & Kolluri, 2025).

CONSTITUTIONAL & JUDICIAL FOUNDATIONS OF ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS IN INDIA

Environmental issues were not a prominent part of the discourse during the Constituent Assembly debates. Consequently, the original text of the Indian Constitution did not contain any explicit provisions related to the protection or preservation of the environment. However, in keeping with the idea of the Constitution as a living document, it has since evolved to respond to emerging challenges, including those posed by climate change (Chaturvedi, 2022).

A significant milestone in this evolution came with the 42nd Amendment in 1976, which introduced Article 48A under Part IV, the Directive Principles of State Policy. This provision directs the State to protect and improve the environment and to safeguard forests and wildlife. Around the same time, Article 51A(g) was added to Part IVA, which outlines the Fundamental Duties of citizens. This clause makes it duty of every citizen of India to protect

and improve the natural environment, including forests, lakes, rivers, and wildlife, and to have compassion for living creatures. These additions, though non-justiciable in nature, reflect a growing recognition of the importance of environmental protection within the constitutional framework. There has also been considerable discussion on whether "environment" should be explicitly listed as a subject under one of the three lists in Schedule VII of the Constitution, which delineates the distribution of legislative powers between the Union and the states (Bhat, 2019; Mishra, 2023).

In 1980, the Tiwari Committee, appointed to examine environmental legislation, recommended that a specific entry on "environmental protection" be added to the Concurrent List. This would enable both Parliament and state legislatures to legislate on matters related to the environment, facilitating a more coherent and cooperative approach. While some aspects of environmental governance - such as forests, protection of wildlife, and pollution control - have since been placed under the Concurrent List, many related issues remain under the default jurisdiction of the Union, resulting in a fragmented policy space.

In addition to constitutional amendments, the Indian judiciary has played a critical role in expanding the scope of environmental protection through the interpretation of fundamental rights.

In a landmark ruling in 1987, in M.C. Mehta v. Union of India, the Supreme Court held that the right to life under Article 21 includes the right to live in a clean and pollution-free environment. This interpretation marked the beginning of a judicial trend that increasingly linked environmental quality with constitutionally guaranteed human rights. The very next year, in Rural Litigation and Entitlement Kendra v. State of Uttar Pradesh (1988), the Court reaffirmed that a healthy environment is intrinsic to the right to life. This trajectory continued in Virender Gaur v. State of Haryana (1995), where the Court ruled that environmental preservation and the maintenance of ecological balance are fundamental to the enjoyment of life and liberty under Article 21.

More recently, the Supreme Court in M.K. Ranjitsinh v. Union of India (2024) recognised that the right against the adverse effects of climate change is now encompassed within the fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution, particularly under Articles 14 and 21. This judgment represents a significant development, as it not only acknowledges climate change as a rights-based issue but also places a constitutional obligation on both the State and society to act against its detrimental effects (Kumar & Naik, 2024).

THE ENABLING ROLE OF INDIAN FEDERALISM IN CLIMATE POLICY-MAKING

India's federal structure - a strong central government alongside autonomous states has encouraged several climate policy innovations through both unified national initiatives and decentralised state-level actions. The Union government has set broad frameworks such as the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) with its eight thematic missions, while all states and union territories have prepared their own State Action Plans on Climate Change (SAPCCs) by the mid-2010s in response. This top

down nudge successfully put climate change on the policy agenda of every state (Kumar, 2018). Many SAPCCs were developed with support from central agencies and international partners, illustrating cooperative federalism. For instance, the central government convened technical experts (e.g. UNDP, GIZ) to assist states in formulating their climate plans. Several states also established dedicated climate change cells or departments (e.g. Gujarat's Climate Change Department in 2009), creating institutional mechanisms to coordinate climate actions across sectors. By the late 2010s, states such as Gujarat, Odisha, Tamil Nadu, and Maharashtra had set up climate change councils or missions to mainstream climate concerns in local governance. These subnational institutions enable experimentation and locally tailored measures while aligning with national strategies. Researchers note that some pioneering state initiatives have even "shaped the national policy landscape through vertical diffusion," as the central government scaled up successful state experiments in its national programs (Dubash, & Pillai, 2023).

For example, Maharashtra's leadership in crafting a climate mitigation strategy provided a template later reflected in national policies. Such positive feedback loops demonstrate how India's federal system allows innovative climate actions to germinate at state and local levels and then inform broader national efforts.

Financial mechanisms in India's federal system have also bolstered climate action. The Finance Commission - a constitutional body for fiscal transfers, has progressively incorporated environmental criteria in its formulas. Notably, the 14th & 15th Finance Commissions rewarded rewarded states for maintaining forest cover, incentivising states to conserve forests - a key carbon sink - by compensating them for the opportunity costs of foregoing resource extraction (Finance Commission, 2020).

Similarly, disaster risk management has been included in federal fiscal planning, reflecting greater recognition of climate-related vulnerabilities. These measures represent a form of "climate-friendly" fiscal federalism, aligning state budgets with national climate goals. In addition to general transfers, the central government provides climate-specific grants through schemes like the National Adaptation Fund for Climate Change, overseen by a National Steering Committee on Climate Change (NSCCC). Under this mechanism, states propose projects to a joint committee of senior officials, receiving technical guidance and funding for locally-prioritised climate projects. While relatively small in scale, the NSCCC process gives states flexibility to define their climate adaptation priorities within a national support framework.

Cooperative federalism in India has yielded tangible successes in clean energy and low-carbon technology deployment. Renewable energy expansion is a prime example: the central government, via agencies like the Solar Energy Corporation of India (SECI) and NTPC, conducts large-scale solar and wind power auctions and serves as a bulk power purchaser, essentially "buffering" the risks for state utilities. Studies show that from 2010 to 2020, centrally organised auctions delivered nearly twice as much solar capacity as state-run auctions, helping India rapidly scale up renewables (Atal et al., 2018). The Union government also leverages its financial authority to enforce renewable targets -

for instance, by withholding certain funds if states fall behind on renewable purchase obligations. This blend of incentives and gentle penalties through federal channels has driven states to contribute to India's national goal of 175 GW renewable capacity (achieved in 2022) in a coordinated manner. Another illustration is the electrification of public transport: in 2021-22, a Grand Challenge program pooled demand across several states for electric buses, resulting in a unified tender for 5,450 e-buses for five major cities. This centrally coordinated, consultative procurement helped smaller states and cities benefit from economies of scale, lower costs, and knowledge sharing (Pandey et al., 2022). The tender's success was enabled by collaboration across government levels and high transparency, showing that a well-designed federal initiative can overcome individual states' lack of scale or financing power in adopting clean technology. Overall, India's climate governance has benefited from such cooperative federalism - the Centre provides overarching vision, technical and financial support, and inter-state coordination, while states implement and often innovate on the ground. Despite India's highly centralised tendencies, the federation has proven capable of a unified yet decentralised climate response, with national missions implemented through state efforts and occasionally supplemented by local urban and rural bodies. These positive instances underscore that India's federal arrangement, when leveraged in a collaborative spirit, can be a key asset in advancing climate action across a vast and diverse country.

FEDERAL FRICTIONS AND THE PATH TO CLIMATE COHERENCE

1. Establish a National Legal Framework for Climate Governance:

To effectively safeguard India's population, economy, and ecosystems from the escalating impacts of climate change, it is imperative to move beyond our current reliance on international commitments, Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), and fragmented sectoral initiatives, in this regard, the foremost challenge is the absence of an overarching climate change law in India. Currently, India's climate policy is fragmented across multiple plans and sectoral initiatives, for example, renewable energy is governed by electricity laws, adaptation by disaster management and rural development schemes, etc., with no single unifying statute. There is no formal climate legislation at either the federal or state level, which leads to gaps in coordination and enforceability. Key climate actions are pursued via executive policies like the NAPCC and through disparate laws (e.g. Energy Conservation Act, 2001; Electricity Act, 2003; environmental regulations) that do not explicitly mandate climate targets or delineate clear roles for each level of government. This piecemeal approach has resulted in inconsistent and sometimes overlapping efforts, and crucial areas (such as climate adaptation or subnational emissions reductions) fall through the cracks. Therefore, what India now requires is a national, binding climate law - one that establishes a clear legal framework backed by judicial oversight (Pillai & Dubash, 2023).

This climate law can form the basis for establishing long-term GHG emission reduction targets, adaptation goals, and periodic reporting requirements (Bhushan & Gopalakrishnan, 2021; Fenna, 2025).

Notably, such a law would go beyond symbolic commitments, offering enforceable rights and responsibilities, operationalising climate rights of the citizens under Articles 14 and 21 of the Constitution (Chhapolia, 2025).

It would also provide a legal pathway for citizens to seek redressal in cases of climate-related injustices. Importantly, the development of such a law through parliamentary deliberation and cross-party consensus would not only ensure broader public legitimacy but also help depoliticise climate policy in India's federal setup. Its underlying spirit must reflect the Latin maxim ubi jus, ibi remedium - where there is a right, there must be a remedy - rather than treating climate action as a mechanical response to international obligations.

However, enacting such a law presents significant constitutional challenges. Climate change, though not explicitly mentioned in the Indian Constitution, intersects with several entries in the three lists under Schedule VII, leading to overlapping jurisdictions and potential administrative ambiguities (Chakraborty, Banerjee, & Srivastva, 2025).

Furthermore, if the proposed legislation alters the distribution of powers or fiscal responsibilities between the Centre and the states, it could invoke Article 368(2) of the Constitution.

This would require not only a special majority in both Houses of Parliament but also ratification by at least half of the state legislatures, highlighting the political and procedural complexity of embedding the climate governance into India's constitutional fabric (Fenna et al., 2023).

2. Decentralised Implementation:

A national legal framework for climate governance, while necessary, is not sufficient on its own. In fact, India's centralised approach is ill-suited to the localised demands of climate action, making enhanced cooperation essential. Without coordination, climate policies and efforts run the risk ofremaining "unpegged to long-term goals or a plan to rectify top-heaviness in Indian climate federalism" (Pillai & Dubash, 2023).

Apart from concerns around coordination, there are several compelling reasons why such a law must be complemented with a robust, decentralised structure that empowers states. Firstly, although climate change is a global phenomenon, its manifestation is deeply local (Shepherd & Sobel, 2020). The risks and impacts of climate change vary significantly across geographies. A coastal district vulnerable to cyclones will require a vastly different response than a drought-prone inland region. Likewise, strategies suitable for urban centres will not address the needs of rural communities. This diversity of impacts demands that climate action be tailored to the ecological, social, and infrastructural realities of individual states and districts (Chakraborty, Banerjee, & Srivastva, 2025).

Secondly, implementation is most effective when led by those who best understand local conditions. State governments and local bodies are better positioned to identify region-specific vulnerabilities and deliver context-sensitive interventions. SEWA's heatwave insurance to protect the health and livelihoods of women workers in informal sector during extreme heat

events in Ahmedabad is a case in point in perfectly aligning specific concerns with tailored responses. This localised response not only addresses a specific climate risk but also aligns closely with the socio-economic realities of the region, demonstrating how ground-up solutions can effectively bridge the gap between climate vulnerability and targeted adaptation.

Thirdly, the availability of natural resources and economic dependencies vary sharply across states. A state like Gujarat, with abundant solar potential, may be well-suited to pursue aggressive renewable energy targets. On the other hand, a coal-dependent state like Jharkhand will require a phased and just transition strategy, taking into account employment dependencies and fiscal revenues from extractive industries (Singh, 2025; TERI, 2019). A one-size-fits-all approach could result in policy resistance and economic distress in such regions.

These reasons collectively point to the need for a federal climate governance framework, where the Centre sets the overarching policy vision, while states are empowered to chart their own paths within it (Fenna et al., 2023).

3. Reimagining the Role of States as Equal Partners in Climate Governance:

After 2008, states were tasked with creating the State Action Plan on Climate Change (SAPCCs) to align with the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC). While this was a valuable start, in practice most SAPCCs became one-off, box-ticking exercises rather than dynamic strategies. Research found that states often simply replicated the structure of the national plan without tailoring it to local realities

and mitigation measures were downplayed due to guidance from the Centre at the time. In other words, the centrally driven process inadvertently smothered subnational innovation states refrained from ambitious or context-specific actions, treating the SAPCC as a compliance document (Dubash & Jogesh, 2014).

Additionally, initial enthusiasm waned because there were no clear implementation mechanisms or dedicated funds tied to these plans (Pillai, Dubash, & Bhatia, 2021). The vagueness about financing state climate plans significantly diminished state ownership and momentum (Kumar, 2018). Many SAPCCs remained on paper, unsupported by budgets or institutional follow-up, as states were expected to cover actions through existing schemes without additional resources. This experience exposed an over-centralised model in which states had limited agency or incentive to act beyond directives from New Delhi.

a. States as Innovation Laboratories: India's federal structure offers a unique advantage - the ability to experiment at the subnational level.

State governments can serve as innovation labs, testing new policies, technologies, and governance models that, if successful, can be scaled up nationally. To encourage such local innovations, India can introduce climate innovation incentives, rewarding states that outperform on emissions reduction, or implement novel policy pilots (World Bank, 2022). This approach mirrors successful international practices in climate federalism, where dynamic learning between tiers of government fosters policy resilience (Fenna, 2025; Jodoin & Setzer, 2023).

b. Successful Decentralized Efforts: Across the country, there have been several promising decentralised efforts led by municipalities, state departments, and civil society showing that localised climate action can be practical, targeted and responsive.

In Gujarat, the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) has implemented a parametric insurance scheme for informal women workers to protect them from heat-related income loss. The initiative offers financial relief during extreme heat waves, which are becoming more frequent in Ahmedabad. By linking payouts to temperature thresholds, SEWA's model helps protect vulnerable communities while encouraging climate-resilient planning (World Economic Forum, 2023). Kerala's Alappuzha Municipality is another example. In response to seawater intrusion and freshwater scarcity, the municipality introduced an "Environment Budget" in 2022.

This budget links financial planning to sustainability goals, directing funds to address issues like salinity, declining groundwater, and unregulated construction. Local leaders collaborated with civil society and experts to develop this practical, community-focused budgeting process (Kumar, 2018). In Guwahati, Assam, a Flood Early Warning System (FEWS) was developed by the Energy and Resources Institute (TERI) and the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA). The system gives a 72-hour lead time before heavy rainfall or flash floods. It uses data from the India Meteorological Department and is now a model that can be replicated in other Indian cities facing similar risks (TERI, 2020).

Mumbai has also seen efforts to build resilience through initiatives such as the 2022 Climate Action Plan, which is a joint effort between the government, the World Resources Institute and the C40 Cities network that includes leaders like Singapore, emphasising the role of nature in addressing Mumbai's vulnerability to a changing climate, and also through efforts to build resilience through restoration of natural buffers like mangroves and creeks. Studies by the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) and IIT-Bombay argue for reviving the city's blue-green infrastructure; floodplains, wetlands, and stormwater drains to tackle frequent waterlogging. These nature-based solutions are now part of Mumbai's updated flood management strategy (Udasmankikar, 2020; 2021). These examples show how subnational innovations can drive climate action from the ground up. By treating states as innovation laboratories, India can shape a climate strategy that is national in vision but local in action.

c. Embracing Compensatory Federalism: The idea that states are passive recipients of central directives is both inaccurate and counterproductive. In practice, states often compensate for central policy gaps by tailoring national frameworks to local needs. This dynamic reflects what scholars like Pillai and Dubash (2021) refer to as "compensatory climate governance", where the interplay between levels of government strengthens the overall system. Federalism, in this context, is less about rigid role division and more about responsive, adaptive collaboration, where both the Centre and states fill each other's blind spots. Therefore, for India's climate strategy to be effective, it must go beyond viewing states as mere implementers of centrally designed plans.

States must be treated as active collaborators - capable of designing, piloting, and scaling solutions tailored to their specific climate risks and socio-economic realities (Fenna, 2025; Singh, 2025).

4.   Leveraging   Existing   Bodies   for Intergovernmental Coordination:

Climate governance by nature cuts across administrative boundaries and government tiers - policies in energy, agriculture, transport, or urban development all intersect with climate outcomes and often require alignment between central mandates and state implementation and for such decentralised implementation to succeed, there must be a permanent institutional mechanism to serve as a bridge between the Centre and the states.

Until a new body is created, existing institutions can be reimagined to play a more active role in ensuring integrated climate planning that reflects both national priorities and subnational realities. However, the existing bodies, including the Prime Minister's Council on Climate Change (PMCCC) intended as a high-level coordinating forum, have met only sporadically and have not effectively guided a holistic national strategy (Rattani et al., 2018; Sangomla, 2021). There is also the National Steering Committee on Climate Change (NSCCC), which lacks representation from sub-national governments and many other non-state actors (Deshpande, Mukherji, and Sastry, 2022). Similarly, under the Carbon Credit Trading Scheme, 2023, the Ministry of Power has established the National Steering Committee (NSC-ICM) as the central authority tasked with steering and operationalising India's carbon market framework.

However, the existing bodies, including the Prime Minister's Council on Climate Change (PMCCC) intended as a high-level coordinating forum, have met only sporadically and have not effectively guided a holistic national strategy (Rattani et al., 2018; Sangomla, 2021). There is also the National Steering Committee on Climate Change (NSCCC), which lacks representation from sub-national governments and many other non-state actors (Deshpande, Mukherji, and Sastry, 2022). Similarly, under the Carbon Credit Trading Scheme, 2023, the Ministry of Power has established the National Steering Committee (NSC-ICM) as the central authority tasked with steering and operationalising India's carbon market framework. However, concerns have been raised regarding the notification being vague about how targets for different sectors will be determined and monitored, leaving room for regulatory uncertainty and potential inefficiencies (Sreenivas & Chunekar, 2024). Yet another example is the Apex Committee for the Implementation of the Paris Agreement (ACIPA), whose mandate remains largely confined to coordination among central ministries, with no clear framework for integrating state-level efforts (Singh, 2025). The result is a coordination gap as states are implementing many climate-related programs (renewables, energy efficiency, adaptation projects) but there is no regularised process for the union and states to jointly deliberate on targets, progress, and resolving cross-cutting issues.

Reviving them with greater representation from state governments and civil society would help democratise climate decision-making and promote more inclusive, bottom-up policy dialogue.

The role of NITI Aayog must also evolve beyond policy visioning. It is uniquely positioned to serve as a convergence platform for long-term climate and development planning across ministries and states. Empowering it with a dedicated climate vertical and clearer mandate for facilitating inter-state coordination would add coherence to India's climate strategy. If India is to implement a national climate law effectively and equitably, these existing but underutilised bodies must be transformed into active enablers of cooperative federalism in the climate space.

5. Repositioning the Finance Commission as a Climate Actor:

In recent years, there has been a growing and sustained discourse around the intersection of fiscal federalism and climate change. Naturally, much of this discussion has centered on the evolving role of the Finance Commission, given its critical influence on intergovernmental resource distribution. Traditionally, Finance Commissions have used factors like population, income distance, area, and sometimes ecology to decide states' share of central taxes. The 14th FC (2015-20) made a landmark move by assigning 7.5% weight to "forest cover" in the formula, and the 15th FC (2021–26) raised this to 10% for "forest and ecology" (Verma & Mehra, 2024).

This change has had tangible impact: states with high forest cover were rewarded with larger allocations, effectively compensating them for preserving forests which serve as carbon sinks. In fact, through this mechanism the 15th Finance Commission facilitated the transfer of an estimated ₹4.5 lakh crore to states for forest conservation, arguably the world's largest such payment for ecosystem services.

The 15th FC also recommended specific grants for air pollution mitigation in cities, acknowledging emerging environmental priorities.

However, to position the Finance Commission as a central player in climate governance, action must begin at the Central level. Firstly, the government can consider reframing the carbon tax in India, also known as the Clean Energy Cess or Clean Environment Cess, as a direct tax, instead of a cess. Such a step can take the form of a federated carbon pricing model - similar to systems in countries like Canada and Indonesia - where the Centre sets a flexible carbon price and the resulting revenue is shared back with the states.

This would allow states to reinvest carbon revenues into region-specific climate mitigation and adaptation programs. Since only taxes (and not cesses) are shareable between the Union and states, this move would allow climate revenue to be distributed through the devolution mechanism. This, however, would necessitate a Constitutional amendment. Secondly, the Terms of Reference (ToR) issued by the President to the Finance Commission must explicitly include climate-oriented objectives (Pandey, 2023).

This would institutionalise environmental concerns into India's core fiscal architecture and create an enduring incentive for states to prioritise sustainable development.

The 16th Finance Commission is a timely opportunity to operationalise the idea that public finance must guide the country toward a sustainable, low-carbon future. As noted by Verma & Mehra (2024), the Finance Commission

must provide a "fiscal blueprint that harmonises economic growth with environmental imperatives."

6. Ensuring Accountability through Long-Term Monitoring and Fiscal Oversight:

Effective climate governance demands not only strong policies and institutions but also mechanisms for continuous monitoring, adaptive planning, and fiscal accountability. Without consistent feedback loops, even the most ambitious climate strategies risk falling short in implementation.

India's climate actions are predominantly financed through sectoral budgets and international funds, lacking a dedicated domestic climate finance framework. This has led to a reliance on a patchwork of Centrally Sponsored Schemes (CSS) - such as those targeting renewable energy, energy efficiency, and water conservation - to indirectly serve climate objectives. However, these schemes often suffer from rigidities and are not specifically designed to reward or monitor climate performance. The absence of a comprehensive, integrated Measurement, Reporting, and Verification (MRV) system further exacerbates this issue, making it challenging to track financial flows, assess the effectiveness of expenditures, and ensure accountability.

Furthermore, while some states have initiated green or climate budgeting practices, there is a pressing need for a uniform national strategy to effectively integrate state actions with national climate targets. Without robust monitoring mechanisms, poorer or more climate-vulnerable states may lack the necessary resources and

oversight to adapt effectively under existing allocations. Therefore, reforming fiscal instruments and establishing comprehensive monitoring frameworks are essential steps to align financial flows with climate goals and enhance the efficacy of climate actions across all levels of government.

Firstly, to enable a long-term and adaptive climate policy framework, it is essential to establish real-time climate data collection systems that support evidence-based decision-making (MoEFCC, 2023). This requires targeted investments in data infrastructure, particularly for tracking localised climate impacts, emissions patterns, and the effectiveness of adaptation measures. Moreover, any future climate legislation must incorporate provisions for mandatory periodic legislative reviews. These reviews would serve to evaluate implementation progress, revise targets where necessary, and ensure that national strategies remain aligned with emerging climate challenges and evolving international commitments.

Secondly, the role of oversight institutions like the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) must be expanded to include annual or biennial audits of climate-related expenditures by the Centre and states, verification of climate outcomes tied to budgetary allocations, and monitoring the use of performance-based climate grants or carbon revenues, if introduced. This would institutionalise a transparent, independent audit mechanism that holds all levels of government accountable, ensures proper fund utilisation, and flags implementation bottlenecks. Similar models are used in countries like the UK, where the Climate Change Committee plays a quasi-audit role, issuing progress assessments to

Parliament every two years (Climate Change Committee, 2025).

CONCLUSION

India's quest to balance development and climate imperatives will largely depend on how effectively its federal structure can be harnessed for climate action. This paper has analysed the multifaceted relationship between federalism and climate change policy in India. We found that while India's centralised tendencies have provided national direction in setting ambitious renewable energy goals and representing India's commitments globally, the decentralised elements of its governance have proven essential in implementing and localising these goals. States have emerged as crucial actors, whether by preparing climate plans, innovating at the grassroots, or piloting projects that later inform national policy.

Yet, challenges like coordination failures, uneven capacities, and misaligned incentives have prevented India from fully unlocking the potential of its multi-level governance. Federalism, in the Indian context, is neither purely a barrier nor a panacea; it is a structure within which climate policy must be negotiated and optimised.

Moving forward, strengthening India's climate response calls for an embrace of cooperative federalism, one where the Union and states work in partnership, guided by common objectives and informed by each other's experiences. Institutional reforms such as the creation of a dedicated climate council, legal enactments to cement climate governance processes, and reorientation of fiscal tools to support green

development will be critical. Equally important is fostering a culture of consultation, transparency, and shared learning across states. Climate change is a crisis that transcends political boundaries, and thus a unified national effort built on respect for India's federal diversity is the need of the hour. With improved alignment, India's federal system can become a source of strength: leveraging central resources and state ingenuity together can yield innovative, scalable solutions for climate mitigation and adaptation.

India's success in this endeavor matters not only for its own people, who stand on the frontlines of climate impacts, but also for the world. As one of the largest emerging economies, India's approach to climate federalism could offer a model for other federations grappling with similar issues of governance and sustainability.

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CSR FOR GENDER EQUITY: EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH SKILL DEVELOPMENT AND LIVELIHOOD INITIATIVES

Suchitra Tripathi*

ABSTRACT

This article critically examines the role of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in promoting gender parity through economic and skill-development initiatives targeting women in rural and semi-urban India. It specifically focuses on post-pandemic, HR-driven CSR interventions, exploring their alignment with broader business strategies and inclusive development goals. Framed within the context of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 5 on Gender Equality and SDG 8 on Decent Work and Economic Growth, the study evaluates how targeted CSR programs can reduce gender disparities, enhance women's employability, and foster entrepreneurship. The analysis is supported by case studies, empirical data, and relevant academic literature to substantiate its findings.

OVERVIEW

In India, gender inequality remains a pervasive issue, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas, where women face significant structural barriers in accessing opportunities related to entrepreneurship, work, and education. These systemic challenges are often compounded by deeply ingrained cultural norms, limited access to resources, and inadequate institutional support. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these gender disparities, leading to a historic decline in female workforce participation, with the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) reporting a significant drop in women's employment during the crisis (CMIE, 2021). The economic impact of the pandemic disproportionately affected women, further entrenching gender-based inequities. In response to these challenges, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has emerged as a powerful tool to address gender disparities. By investing in women-focused livelihood and skill development programs, businesses can play a crucial role in promoting gender equality. CSR initiatives targeting women's education, vocational training, financial inclusion, and entrepreneurship provide women with the resources and opportunities they need to overcome traditional barriers and contribute to economic growth. Through such interventions, CSR can not only drive social change but also empower women to become active participants in the workforce, fostering long-term gender parity in both rural and urban India.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

SDGs, Gender Equity, and Corporate Social Responsibility CSR describes business programs designed to evaluate and accept accountability for an organization's impact on the environment and society. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) refers to a set of policies and practices adopted by private businesses to reduce their negative impact on society and contribute positively to social & environmental goals. While corporations are the primary drivers of CSR initiatives, a broad range of actors, including

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governments, NGOs, civil society organizations, and the beneficiaries themselves—play an influential role in shaping and implementing CSR agendas. Over time, there has been a growing recognition of women, particularly in the Global South, as critical stakeholders in CSR programs. This has led to a rise in initiatives focused on women's empowerment, often delivered through public-private partnerships and multi-stakeholder collaborations involving corporations, non-profits, and international funding bodies.

Section 135 of The Companies Act of 2013 institutionalises business involvement in nation-building by requiring CSR activities for specific types of Indian enterprises. Under this framework, companies meeting specified financial thresholds—namely, a net worth of ₹500 crore, a turnover of ₹1,000 crore, or a net profit of ₹5 crore—are required to allocate at least 2% of their average net profit from the preceding three financial years toward CSR activities. The law also mandates the formation of a CSR committee within the board, comprising at least three directors, including one independent director.

While SDG 8 promotes inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for everyone, SDG 5 calls for gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. A core aspect of SDG 5 is ensuring women's full and effective participation in economic life, equal access to opportunities, and recognition of unpaid care work. In alignment with this, CSR initiatives in India have increasingly focused on skill development and livelihood enhancement programs tailored for women, particularly from marginalized communities.

By providing vocational training, digital literacy, financial inclusion workshops, and entrepreneurship support, corporate entities play a crucial role in bridging gender disparities in the labour market. These interventions not only equip women with market-relevant skills but also foster greater economic independence, decision-making power, and leadership potential. Such targeted efforts contribute to broader social transformation by challenging traditional gender norms and promoting inclusive growth. The alignment of CSR strategies with SDG 5 underscores the importance of cross-sector collaboration in building equitable, sustainable communities. (Singh, Singh 2020) Thus, CSR initiatives that emphasise women's economic participation and skill development directly support these global goals (UN, 2015).

The Function of HR in Creating and Carrying Out CSR Projects

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives have emerged as a vital mechanism for advancing women's empowerment across India. Recognizing the transformative potential of skill development, corporate and non-profit entities have implemented a range of programs aimed at addressing the employability gap among women. These initiatives offer structured vocational training in diverse sectors such as agriculture, textiles, healthcare, handicrafts, and digital literacy, equipping women with market-relevant technical competencies. By enhancing access to such training, CSR programs enable women to secure meaningful employment or pursue entrepreneurial ventures, thereby contributing to their economic independence and broader social mobility.

A key driver of the strategic orientation of CSR initiatives is the active involvement of Human Resources (HR) departments. HR professionals bring valuable expertise in workforce planning, training design, and performance evaluation, which significantly shapes the effectiveness and inclusivity of CSR programs. Their contributions include identifying region-specific skill gaps among women, designing accessible and gender-sensitive training curricula, and facilitating linkages with industries to support employment and entrepreneurship.

Additionally, HR departments play a crucial role in embedding gender-responsive monitoring and evaluation frameworks, ensuring that programs are aligned not only with social impact goals but also with long-term workforce development and community engagement strategies. (Singh & Chatterjee, 2018).

Many CSR initiatives also go beyond skill-building by integrating components such as financial literacy, leadership development, and personal growth workshops. These holistic interventions address structural and socio-cultural barriers, helping women build confidence, exercise agency, and participate more fully in economic and civic life.

Whether implemented in urban or rural contexts, such initiatives foster inclusive growth and contribute to narrowing gender disparities in access to opportunity. By combining professional HR strategies with community-focused programming, CSR initiatives serve as a powerful conduit for sustainable and gender-equitable development across diverse socio-economic settings in India. (Kamath, 2023)

Post-Epidemic Situations and Women's Earnings

Women lost a disproportionate number of jobs as a result of the pandemic-induced economic slowdown. Many were compelled to leave the workforce as a result of increased household responsibilities and layoffs in industries like education, hospitality, and textiles where women were heavily represented. The McKinsey Global Institute (2020) projects that advancing gender equality could raise India's GDP by $770 billion by 2025—an 18 percent increase over the current trajectory (McKinsey & Company, 2018). Despite this potential, India continues to trail behind the Asia-Pacific average on key gender-related indicators such as labour force participation, maternal health, digital and financial inclusion, sex ratio at birth, and gender-based violence. Although gender gaps in education are narrowing, substantial disparities remain in other areas.

Nonetheless, there are promising avenues for progress. The increasing penetration of digital technologies offers a pathway to expand women's access to financial services and credit, thereby enhancing their economic inclusion. Additionally, improvements in household infrastructure have begun to alleviate the burden of unpaid care work, which remains disproportionately shouldered by women.

In light of these developments, it is essential that both policy frameworks and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives focus strategically on advancing women's economic empowerment. Such efforts not only foster gender equity but also have the potential to significantly contribute to India's long-term

inclusive and sustainable growth.

In this post-pandemic environment, CSR initiatives that focus on women's skill development have become even more important. Among the main areas of attention are:

• Digital literacy: This which involves training women in basic computer skills and the use of digital tools. These skills are increasingly indispensable in a world where remote work, online education, and digital entrepreneurship have become common. Enhancing digital competence allows women to participate in digital marketplaces, access e-governance services, and explore new income-generating opportunities from their homes.

• Financial literacy: This seeks to equip women with the knowledge and skills needed to manage personal finances effectively. This includes understanding concepts such as savings, credit, budgeting, and interest rates, as well as becoming comfortable with using formal banking channels. Financial literacy enhances women's confidence in engaging with financial institutions and plays a critical role in fostering long-term economic independence.

 • Vocational skills: These skills are often tailored to local contexts and market demands—such as tailoring, handicrafts, food processing, and other small-scale entrepreneurial activities—which can serve as sustainable sources of income. By focusing on locally relevant trades, these programs not only enhance women's employability but also support the creation of micro-enterprises that can stimulate community-level economic growth. Taken together, such CSR-led skill development efforts help address

systemic gender inequalities and enable women to take greater control over their economic futures. (Ravindran & Misra, 2021).

Despite global commitments to advancing women's empowerment, recent data illustrates persistent gender disparities within India's labor market. According to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), the unemployment rate among women in India was recorded at 18.5% in June 2024, notably higher than the national average of 9.2% for the same period. Furthermore, the International Labour Organization (ILO) reports that in 2020, the global unemployment rate for women was 5.0%, compared to 3.9% for men. Historically, the female labor force participation rate (LFPR) in India has remained low. However, recent data from the World Bank indicates a modest increase in female participation, with the LFPR for women rising to 32.8% in 2024, up from 23.3% in 2017–18 .

The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these challenges, disproportionately impacting women in the workforce. During the lockdown, only 19% of women remained employed, while 47% lost their jobs permanently. Additionally, women were burdened with an increased share of domestic responsibilities, which, in turn, limited their economic participation and exacerbated gender inequalities.

In response to these challenges, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives have emerged as an important tool to address gender disparities in India's labor market. In the fiscal year 2022–23, Indian companies collectively allocated ₹29,986.92 crore to CSR activities, with a focus on areas such as education, healthcare and

livelihood enhancement. These initiatives have played a key role in supporting the development of micro-enterprises, skill development programs, and vocational training, particularly benefitting women and marginalized communities.

The Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) has been particularly active in leveraging CSR to promote women's economic empowerment. In 2023, CII launched the "CII-TVS Mobility Centre of Excellence on Employment & Livelihood," with the goal of improving livelihoods for 10 million people, including women and youth, by 2030. Despite these efforts, however, the female LFPR remains a significant concern. According to the World Bank Gender Data Portal, the LFPR for women in India in 2024 was 32.8%, compared to 77.1% for men, highlighting a stark gender gap in workforce participation.

In conclusion, while CSR initiatives have contributed to empowering women economically, considerable challenges persist. To address the barriers hindering women's full economic participation, it is essential to implement comprehensive policies that foster gender equality, improve access to education and vocational training, and create more inclusive and supportive work environments. Only through sustained and targeted efforts can India unlock the full potential of its female workforce, ensuring equitable economic development for all.

Examples of Successful CSR Initiatives

A. The Dhaaga Initiative by Tata Power
The goal of Tata Power's Dhaaga women's empowerment program is to teach women how to sew and do other textile-related tasks while also assisting them in starting cooperatives and self-help groups. These women manufacture bags, safety gloves, and school uniforms that are marketed in both domestic and international markets (Tata Power, 2022).

Dhaaga is a community-based retail initiative designed to showcase and celebrate the craftsmanship of women artisans, thereby facilitating their integration into the mainstream marketplace. Through a chain of stores, the initiative provides a platform for women to commercially engage with consumers by branding and selling their products. The first Dhaaga outlet, established near M2K Mall in Rohini, Delhi, features a curated selection of items produced by Self-Help Groups (SHGs), including jute bags, soft toys, apparel, bangles, and paper cups. Revenue generated from sales is equitably distributed among the participating women, promoting financial inclusion and collective economic benefit.

Launched in 2017 by Tata Power at Kamshet village in Pune district, the Dhaaga initiative began as a modest SHG and modern garment production unit. Over time, it has evolved into a women-led movement that not only enhances livelihood opportunities but also fosters entrepreneurship and leadership among women. As of now, the initiative has expanded its operations to 16 locations across several states, including Delhi, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Jharkhand, Tamil Nadu, and Odisha.

By combining skill development with market access, Dhaaga exemplifies a sustainable model of women's empowerment. It aligns with broader objectives of CSR by enabling socio-economic

mobility, promoting local enterprise, and reinforcing the principles of gender-inclusive development.

ANOKA DHAAGA BY TATA POWER

The Anokha Dhaaga initiative, launched in 2015, began with the training of 16 women as artisans in readymade garment manufacturing and traditional handicrafts, with the objective of promoting local talent, conserving traditional arts, and boosting household incomes. Over time, the initiative expanded to regions such as Delhi, Gujarat, and Jharkhand. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Trombay CSR team united over 250 women into the Saheli Mahila Bachat Gat federation, recognizing the potential of collective action. Building on this foundation, the Anokha Dhaaga program was officially launched in January 2021, aimed at supporting the livelihoods of self-help groups. Since its inception, the program has provided skills development and employment opportunities to over 500 women from underprivileged slum communities.

The impact of Anokha Dhaaga has been significant. During the pandemic, the initiative produced over 3.5 lakh certified filtered masks, generating ₹67 lakh in revenue. Additionally, the program successfully completed large-scale business-to-business (B2B) orders, including 27,000 handicraft decoratives for Amazon and 5,000 haversack bags for the Mumbai Marathon organized by TCS. Training programs offered by the initiative cover a range of products, including apparel, home decor, and corporate gifting, providing diverse income-generating opportunities for women. In fiscal year 2024, the program generated ₹56 lakh from 91 B2B orders and organized 21 exhibitions, collaborating with various livelihood platforms to ensure long-term support and growth.

The transformative impact of Anokha Dhaaga is evident in the financial outcomes as well. The initiative has facilitated job work payments totaling ₹25 lakh to women, with full-time workers earning an average of ₹8,000 per month. By FY 2024, the program had reached 512 women, and revenue grew to ₹61 lakh. Anokha Dhaaga has become a beacon of empowerment, offering women the skills and opportunities necessary for financial independence, while also fostering a sense of dignity and community. Each product produced under this initiative symbolizes resilience, hope, and the strength of collective effort.

B. Project Shakti at HUL

By giving them business skills training and products to market, Hindustan Unilever Limited's Project Shakti has empowered over 1.2 lakh women entrepreneurs in rural India, establishing a network of rural saleswomen (HUL, 2023).

Hindustan Unilever Limited (HUL) initiated Project Shakti in 2001, and has since continuously refined and expanded the programme. Initially launched as a controlled pilot aimed at establishing operational efficiency, the programme gradually scaled up through phased implementation. Following the pilot phase, HUL expanded the initiative in its first major rollout and has subsequently introduced additional components to enhance both scale and impact.

Currently, Project Shakti operates through three

distinct models: (i) door-to-door sales conducted within the Shakti Amma's own village; (ii) an assisted distribution model covering the same and neighboring villages; and (iii) retail operations through small storefronts. These models enable greater market penetration while accommodating different community needs and logistical contexts.

A dedicated team of Rural Sales Promoters (RSPs) plays a critical role in supporting the women entrepreneurs—referred to as Shakti Ammas. These RSPs provide training in product knowledge, basic accounting, sales strategies, and problem-solving techniques. Additionally, they help develop the Shakti Ammas' soft skills in communication and negotiation. RSPs offer continuous mentorship, meeting with each entrepreneur on a monthly basis and providing supplementary remote support weekly.

The Shakti Ammas earn a consistent income based on their monthly sales volume. This income—though indirect from HUL—serves as a significant source of financial empowerment, motivating sustained engagement with the initiative. The programme's success in India has also contributed to the evolution and adaptation of the Shakti model in several other countries, reflecting its viability as a scalable, gender-inclusive rural entrepreneurship framework.

C. The Empowerment Program for Women at ITC

Women are trained in agarbatti manufacturing, tailoring, and food processing at ITC's vocational training centres located in several states. Women's incomes have increased significantly as a result of the effort, and household decision-making has improved (ITC, 2023).

The development of a nation is deeply intertwined with the empowerment of its women, particularly those from disadvantaged and rural backgrounds. Despite their substantial contributions to household well-being and the broader economy, these women often remain unacknowledged and underserved. Structural barriers such as inadequate access to education, limited vocational training, exclusion from formal financial systems, and restrictive socio-cultural norms confine many women to low-paying and insecure forms of labour. Recognising these challenges, ITC Limited has launched a comprehensive Women Empowerment Programme that aims to enable women to realise their full potential as key agents of social and economic transformation.

An important component of ITC's empowerment agenda is the Ultra-Poor Women Graduation Programme. This targeted, two-year intervention focuses on women-headed households living in

extreme poverty, where the woman is the sole breadwinner. Through entrepreneurship training, livelihood support, and socio-economic inclusion measures, the programme has enabled over 40,131 women to achieve meaningful and dignified employment, while also experiencing notable improvements in other developmental indicators. Looking ahead, ITC has set an ambitious target of reaching 250,000 women through its Women's Economic Empowerment Programme by the year 2030, reinforcing its long-term commitment to inclusive and gender-responsive development.

D. Cummins India Limited launched the Empower-Her initiative, aimed at promoting financial inclusion and independence for women in model villages. One of the key programs under this initiative, "Udgam," was introduced at the Phaltan Megasite in 2017. The initiative focuses on raising awareness about sanitary hygiene, the usage of sanitary napkins, and fostering entrepreneurship by setting up machines for the production of eco-friendly sanitary napkins at a lower cost. The manufacturing and marketing of these products are carried out by women's self-help groups, with support from Anganwadi and Asha workers. This project offers women in rural areas additional income opportunities, supplementing their agricultural activities. The success of the program at Cummins' sites in Phaltan, Jamshedpur, and Dewas led to its replication at two more locations in Maharashtra, in collaboration with Cummins' suppliers. Given the program's significant community impact and high potential for replication, Cummins plans to expand the Udgam initiative to various locations across India, partnering with stakeholders and suppliers. As of now, the Empower-Her initiative has

benefited over 1,138 women, providing them with additional income opportunities to support their families. The total budget allocated to the project was INR 1.0276 crore, reflecting Cummins' commitment to women's empowerment and socio-economic development.

E. ONGC's Project Sakhi, part of the Swachh Bharat Initiative, focuses on advancing menstrual hygiene among young girls. This project, "Project Sakhi: A Ray of Hope," is a collaborative effort between ONGC, the District Administration of Sivasagar in Assam, UNICEF, and ONGC. Its primary aim is to introduce modern and efficient menstrual hygiene management practices to 7,000 students across 13 government girls' high schools in Sivasagar District and Sivasagar Girls College. The project also includes prominent schools such as K.V., Adarsh Vidyalaya, and D.P.S. Schools in Nazira and Sivasagar, ensuring broad inclusivity and access. Additionally, the initiative extended its reach to Hazira, where eco-friendly incinerators (Ashudhhinashaks) were introduced to 118 schools. This dual approach not only addresses immediate sanitary needs but also emphasizes eco-conscious menstrual waste management. Through these efforts, Project Sakhi aims to improve menstrual hygiene, empower young girls, and contribute to their overall well-being and progress.

Difficulties in Implementing CSR for Women's Empowerment

The efficacy of CSR-led gender equity initiatives is hampered by a number of issues, despite encouraging results:
Sociocultural Obstacles: Deep-rooted patriarchal norms, early marriages, and mobility restrictions continue to limit women's participation in CSR

programs. These societal barriers often prevent women from accessing education, employment, and leadership opportunities, thereby undermining the objectives of empowerment initiatives. (Chopra & Ghosh, 2019).

Lack of Scalability: Many CSR programs remain localized due to limited partnerships and resources, hindering their expansion to broader regions. This confinement restricts the reach and impact of initiatives designed to benefit a larger population of women across diverse geographical areas.

Sustainability Issues: The absence of long-term financial support and mentoring mechanisms leads to high dropout rates among program beneficiaries. Without sustained investment and guidance, the initial gains achieved through CSR initiatives often diminish over time, failing to produce lasting empowerment.

Resistance to Change Within Organizations

Resistance to change within organizations is also a critical barrier to advancing women's empowerment through CSR. Employees and leadership may be resistant to gender-focused initiatives, either due to entrenched biases or a lack of understanding about the benefits of gender equality. Overcoming this resistance requires strong leadership, clear communication, and a commitment to fostering an inclusive organizational culture where gender equality is prioritized.

Inadequate Monitoring and Evaluation: A lack of robust impact assessment frameworks hampers the ability to measure the effectiveness of CSR

programs accurately. This deficiency in monitoring prevents the identification of successful strategies and the rectification of shortcomings, thereby limiting the potential for evidence-based reforms and continuous improvement.

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that includes engaging with local communities to overcome sociocultural barriers, fostering partnerships to enhance scalability, ensuring sustained funding and mentorship for program continuity, and developing comprehensive monitoring systems to evaluate impact effectively. By tackling these issues, CSR initiatives can more effectively contribute to the empowerment of women and the advancement of gender equality in India.

Techniques to Increase Impact

1. Public-Private Partnerships
Collaborations between corporations and government initiatives can significantly amplify the impact of CSR programs. For instance, partnerships with schemes like the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana–National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM) and the Skill India Mission have proven instrumental in scaling skill development and livelihood opportunities for women across various sectors. Such alliances leverage the strengths of both sectors to create sustainable and scalable empowerment models.

2. Community Engagement
Active involvement of local women's organizations and community leaders ensures that CSR initiatives are culturally sensitive and garner grassroots support. Engaging with communities fosters trust, enhances participation

and ensures that programs are tailored to the specific needs and contexts of the beneficiaries, thereby enhancing their effectiveness and sustainability.

3. Technology-Enabled Solutions

Leveraging digital technologies can bridge gaps in education and market access for women. Digital platforms, such as e-learning modules and online marketplaces, have been effective in providing women with new avenues for skill acquisition and entrepreneurship. For example, initiatives like the Digital Sarthak program aim to empower women entrepreneurs by enhancing their digital skills and facilitating access to broader markets. (Banerjee & Duflo, 2020).

4. Mentorship Networks

Establishing robust mentorship networks offers continuous support and guidance to women. Programs that connect women with experienced mentors and alumni networks have been successful in fostering leadership and personal development among participants. Such mentorship structures provide role models, build confidence, and help navigate professional challenges, thereby contributing to sustained empowerment.

By integrating these strategies, CSR initiatives can create a more inclusive and empowering environment for women, facilitating their active participation in India's socio-economic progress.

POLICY SUGGESTIONS

• Encouraging CSR with a gender focus can be significantly bolstered by offering tax breaks and recognition initiatives aimed at businesses that prioritize gender equality in their CSR programs. Tax incentives can motivate companies to invest in gender-focused initiatives, such as women's skill development, financial inclusion, and gender-responsive workplace policies. Recognition initiatives, such as awards or public acknowledgment, can inspire competition among businesses to improve their gender equity efforts, contributing to greater societal transformation.

• A mandatory CSR gender audit would require businesses to provide gender-disaggregated data in their CSR reports, ensuring transparency and accountability. This would allow stakeholders, including consumers, investors, and governments, to assess a company's commitment to gender equality and the effectiveness of its gender-focused CSR initiatives. By institutionalizing gender audits, businesses are encouraged to regularly evaluate and improve their gender equity efforts, strengthening the impact of CSR on women's empowerment.

• Building the capacity of HR professionals through specialized instruction in impact measurement and gender-sensitive program design is essential for the success of gender-focused CSR initiatives. HR professionals should be equipped with the necessary skills to assess the impact of gender initiatives, design programs that are inclusive and effective, and ensure that gender equality considerations are integrated into all aspects of the company's operations. This training ensures that gender-focused CSR programs are well-executed, impactful, and sustainable.

As part of environmental, social, and governance (ESG) standards, it is crucial to promote gender equity by integrating CSR initiatives with ESG goals. By linking gender equity with broader sustainability goals, businesses can ensure that their CSR strategies align with global efforts to

achieve inclusive development and gender equality. This integration will also provide companies with a comprehensive approach to improving their overall ESG performance, demonstrating that gender equity is an essential component of responsible and sustainable business practices. (Chatterjee & Mitra, 2022).

CONCLUSION

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) can serve as a critical link between business objectives and social transformation, especially in the pursuit of a more sustainable and inclusive India. When CSR initiatives are spearheaded by Human Resources (HR) and grounded in strategic planning, they have the capacity to empower women by equipping them with the tools, confidence, and financial independence necessary to thrive. These initiatives, when aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), ensure meaningful impact both locally and globally. CSR holds immense potential as a transformative force for women's empowerment and sustainable development, offering businesses a platform to promote gender equality while creating long-term value for stakeholders and communities. When companies intentionally incorporate gender-sensitive approaches—whether through education, skills training, financial inclusion, or improved workplace policies—they not only support individual women but also help build resilient families, vibrant communities, and stronger economies.

As the global community strives to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, it is imperative that businesses embrace their responsibility to foster a more inclusive, just, and sustainable world.

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FAITH IN PRACTICE: SEASONAL WORK, INFORMAL GOVERNANCE, AND ECONOMIC CONTINUITY AT SNAN MELAS

Dr. Ramanand* and Patanjali Pandey**

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the seasonal, informal economy that emerges around Snan Melas—periodic ritual congregations held at sacred riverfronts in India. While often viewed through the lens of mass religiosity and civic spectacle, Snan Melas also operate as complex socio-economic ecosystems where informal vendors, itinerant workers, and cultural performers play a pivotal role. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Varanasi and Ayodhya, the study reveals how these actors navigate legal ambiguity, spatial competition, and regulatory pressures to sustain vibrant, trust-based economies rooted in ritual labor and regional mobility. Through their everyday practices, ranging from selling devotional items to offering services like tonsure and photography, these workers co-create sacred public space by blending commerce, spirituality, and civic engagement. Rather than depicting informality as a policy deficit, the paper positions it as a vernacular mode of governance marked by adaptability, cooperation, and embedded knowledge systems. It highlights how caste, gender, and kinship mediate access and opportunity within this seasonal economy, while also tracing narratives of aspiration, identity transformation, and intergenerational continuity. The paper argues that Snan Melas represent a unique form of "sacred publicness" where economic life is not peripheral to ritual, but integral to its unfolding. Recognising this interplay opens up new possibilities for inclusive urban policy, particularly in the management of large-scale public events in culturally dense contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Snan Melas periodic ritual congregations that draw millions to India's sacred rivers represent one of the most enduring forms of collective religious experience in South Asia. Rooted in the cosmic rhythms of Hindu cosmology and calendrical time, these gatherings are not only acts of devotion but also expressions of public culture, civic infrastructure, and economic life. Most commonly associated with sacred sites like Varanasi, Prayagraj, and Ayodhya, Snan Melas are temporally bounded yet deeply rooted in regional histories and ritual calendars. What distinguishes them from other pilgrimage events is their periodicity, seasonality, and the confluence of ritual with everyday social and economic practices (Morinis, 1984; Darian, 1978).

While much scholarship has focused on the religious or symbolic aspects of the Snan Mela often treating it as an instance of mass devotion or ritual purification there is a growing recognition of its wider socio-economic significance. These Melas function not only as ritual sites but as temporary cities that must be governed, inhabited, and sustained. They offer a compelling case study for how sacred space intersects with public administration, cultural memory, and informal economies (Eck, 2011; Singh, 2017). This paper contributes to that body of literature by focusing on one vital but understudied dimension: the seasonal economy that emerges around the Mela particularly the roles played by informal vendors, itinerant workers, and cultural service providers.

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Snan Melas are remarkable not just for the scale of their ritual orchestration, but for the diverse actors they bring together priests and pilgrims, sanitation workers and flower sellers, police officers and acrobats, tea vendors and religious musicians. These actors co-produce the Mela space through a combination of formal governance and informal negotiation. What emerges is a sacred economy, where devotional labour and entrepreneurial practice are not opposites but coexisting modes of action. Here, value is not defined purely in monetary terms but also through spiritual merit (punya), ancestral continuity, and symbolic prestige (Lynch, 1990; Kaur, 2020).

This paper investigates the economic lives that animate the Snan Melas, with a focus on the seasonal, mobile, and largely informal labour networks that sustain the event's commercial vitality. Through ethnographic fieldwork in Varanasi (during the 2023 Kartik Snan) and Ayodhya (during the 2024 Ram Navami Mela), the paper documents the experiences of small vendors, itinerant workers, and cultural performers who operate outside formal regulatory frameworks yet are central to the experience of the Mela for most pilgrims. Interviews, spatial mapping, and observational data reveal how these actors organise themselves, navigate state regulations, and create value through everyday acts of service and ritual performance.

Rather than portraying informality as a deficit or a governance failure, this study situates it within a broader framework of adaptive civic life. Informal actors whether vendors selling garlands or itinerant barbers offering ritual tonsures demonstrate remarkable resilience and organisational intelligence in managing space, resolving disputes, and engaging with the state.

Their presence reflects not chaos but a distinct mode of civic participation one that is deeply embedded in local knowledge, cultural codes, and regional mobility patterns (Roy, 2009; Bhan, 2016). Moreover, many of these vendors return to the same Mela site annually, forming intergenerational ties with the sacred space and fostering a sense of continuity that formal planning alone cannot ensure. In celebrating this vitality, it is also important to critically assess the challenges that informal workers face particularly in negotiating access to space, securing recognition from state authorities, and coping with physical precarity during large-scale gatherings. Regulation in Mela sites is often inconsistent: some vendors hold temporary permits while others operate under tacit consent or informal understandings with local officials. Such arrangements can be fragile and subject to arbitrary disruptions, especially during high-profile visits or televised rituals. These challenges do not diminish the value of the Snan Mela but rather underscore the need for more inclusive, context-sensitive regulatory frameworks that recognise informal labour as a legitimate and essential component of sacred infrastructure (Srivastava, 2020).

At the same time, the Snan Mela has increasingly become a site of public participation and civic pride. State governments now collaborate with religious bodies, civil society organisations, and local communities to improve sanitation, accessibility, and crowd management. Innovations such as mobile toilets, waste segregation systems, digital mapping of stall locations, and volunteer networks are being trialled with varying degrees of success. While not without flaws, these efforts signal a growing institutional awareness of the Mela's importance as both a spiritual and civic event. Rather than being seen as ungovernable spectacles,

Melas are increasingly recognised as laboratories for inclusive urban management and participatory governance in India's complex socio-religious landscape (Kumar, 2022).

This paper is structured thematically across five sections. Following this introduction, Section 2 maps the sacred economy of the Mela—its spatial distribution, material culture, and modes of exchange. Section 3 examines how caste, gender, and kinship networks shape participation in this economy, particularly in terms of labour mobility and access to vending opportunities. Section 4 discusses how vendors and workers negotiate legality in the context of state regulation, temporary licensing, and surveillance. Section 5 draws on oral histories to highlight the emotional and aspirational dimensions of seasonal labour—stories of return, devotion, and generational continuity. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the broader implications of recognising sacred congregations not just as ritual events but as socio-economic ecosystems. In sum, this paper seeks to illuminate how faith-based economies function not in opposition to governance, development, or modernity but as their textured complements. Snan Melas are neither relics of a pre-modern past nor chaotic as assemblies that require top-down order. They are resilient, negotiated spaces, where ritual and economy, belief and labour, devotion and adaptability come together in a uniquely Indian form of sacred publicness. A fuller understanding of these seasonal economies not only enriches our comprehension of religious life in India but also opens pathways for more just and inclusive urban policy in contexts marked by spiritual density and informal vibrancy.

MAPPING THE SACRED ECONOMY

Snan Melas are not only ritual congregations but also vibrant economic ecosystems, where commerce, devotion, and public interaction intersect meaningfully. These gatherings activate a temporary, place-specific economy that thrives on mobility, low capital entry, and cultural familiarity. What emerges is not a chaotic marketplace but a carefully negotiated field of transactional activity embedded in spiritual ambience—a "sacred economy" that combines religious symbolism with material exchange (Lynch, 1990; Kaur, 2020).

At their peak, Snan Melas host hundreds of thousands of pilgrims over a span of days or weeks, creating high-volume demand for food, transport, shelter, ritual items, and basic services. Vendors respond to this demand with agility and resourcefulness, setting up temporary stalls, mobile carts, and open-air mats. These micro-enterprises range from families selling incense and garlands to artisans offering handcrafted wares, and from street-food sellers to cultural performers. Unlike fixed urban bazaars, these Mela marketplaces are dynamic, with their internal geographies shaped by access to footfall, proximity to riverbanks & temples and informal kinship networks among vendors.

In Varanasi, fieldwork during the 2023 Kartik Snan revealed a layered spatial logic. Prime spaces along the ghats—particularly near Dashashwamedh, Rajendra Prasad Ghat, and Assi—were occupied by vendors with long-standing presence. Many claimed ancestral ties to the space, returning annually or seasonally. Their stalls were often more elaborate, with tarpaulin shelters, gas stoves, mobile QR payment options, and laminated price lists. A bangle-seller from Chunar shared, "We've been here every Kartik since my dada (grandfather) started the business. People know us, and that trust helps our sales." These recurring presences lend a sense of

continuity and reliability to the otherwise ephemeral landscape.

Ayodhya's Ram Navami Mela in 2024 demonstrated a more emergent spatial logic, with vendors adapting to newly designed civic corridors, foot-over bridges, and barricades around the Ram Janmabhoomi area. Here, the interaction between state-led planning and informal economic activity was more visible. While some vendors were temporarily relocated due to security perimeters, others innovated by setting up stalls on adjoining lanes or even floating carts on the Saryu's embankment paths. The positive outcome of this negotiation was evident in how vendors and administrators coordinated to ensure safety without disrupting livelihood opportunities. A local official from the Ayodhya Municipal Corporation noted, "We understand these people are part of the tradition. Without them, the Mela won't feel complete. So, we try to work together."

The range of goods and services available at Snan Melas is staggering. Religious offerings—incense, oil lamps, Rudraksha beads, puja thalis, and framed deities—form one category. But there is also a robust presence of everyday consumption: sweets, snacks, tea, water, utensils, toiletries, basic medicines, and even temporary phone charging booths. Some services are directly tied to ritual, such as barbers offering tonsure ceremonies, or women selling vermilion and bangles with whispered blessings. Others—such as acrobats, puppet artists, toy vendors, or photographers—offer entertainment or memory-making experiences. These categories are porous; a ritual garland-seller may also offer informal guidance on bathing times and temple access, blurring the lines between economic transaction and devotional service.

This economic vibrancy is rooted in a logic of adaptive informality—not a breakdown of order, but a flexible, self-regulating mode of commerce attuned to the sacred temporality of the event. Vendors operate with minimal infrastructure, low overheads, and community-based support systems. Many travel with collapsible furniture, battery-powered lamps, foldable stoves, and prepaid mobile data packages. They share transport, space, and information, and even assist each other in times of illness or crowd surges. These features echo what Roy (2005) has described as the "subaltern urbanism" of Indian cities, where informal actors build robust systems of negotiation and reciprocity.

At the heart of this economy is trust—between vendors and pilgrims, among vendor networks, and between informal actors and public authorities. Many vendors speak of their relationships with repeat pilgrims who seek them out year after year. In Varanasi, a priest from Ballia sold palm-leaf horoscopes while his sons ran a stall selling herbal remedies. "People come to us because they've seen our faces here for decades. This place gives us work, yes, but also pehchaan (identity)," he explained. Trust also governs intra-vendor cooperation: space-sharing, rotation of prime spots, and collective action in moments of police inspection or emergency.

Technology is gradually reshaping aspects of this sacred economy. UPI-based payments, QR code stands, and WhatsApp groups for vendor coordination are increasingly common—particularly among younger entrepreneurs. In Ayodhya, some vendors even used Instagram to promote their stalls ahead of the Mela. However, this digital layer complements rather than replaces traditional forms of transaction and social trust.

As one vendor said, "Even if we take digital payments, we still light a lamp before opening. That part will never change." Here, ritual continuity coexists with economic innovation, demonstrating how sacred economies are open to change while remaining anchored in custom.

Another significant characteristic of Snan Mela markets is their seasonality. These are not standalone events, but part of a larger circuit of fairs and festivals. Vendors travel from one sacred site to another—Kartik Snan, Magh Mela, Chhath Puja, Shivratri Melas, and more—forming a region-wide religious labour circuit. This form of circular mobility enables micro-entrepreneurship in districts where rural employment remains uneven. In many cases, the income generated at the Mela helps families invest in agriculture, children's education, or household repairs. These are not just survival strategies, but aspirational ventures that reveal the economic depth of pilgrimage-based work (Darian, 1978; Morinis, 1984).

While state planning can sometimes constrain informal trade—particularly through zoning restrictions or short-term relocations—recent efforts in Uttar Pradesh have shown a more collaborative trend. In both field sites, municipal authorities worked with vendors' associations, religious committees, and civil defence volunteers to coordinate safety, cleanliness, and vending locations. While not without friction, these engagements suggest the emergence of co-regulated spaces—where informal actors are acknowledged as legitimate stakeholders in the event's success. Such hybrid arrangements deserve further study and policy support, as they offer blueprints for balancing order, equity, and tradition. In conclusion, the economic life of Snan Melas is a story of innovation, mobility, and deeply embedded cultural practice.

Far from being a peripheral feature, these seasonal economies lie at the heart of the Mela's experiential and social richness. They demonstrate how faith can animate economic life—not only through donation or charity, but through dignified, self-organised livelihoods that connect people to ritual, place, and each other. Mapping this sacred economy helps us understand the Mela not only as a spiritual event but as a civic phenomenon, where commerce is infused with meaning, and where the ordinary becomes part of the sacred.

LABOUR, MOBILITY, AND CASTE

The sacred economy of Snan Melas is powered by a remarkable constellation of human effort. Beneath the visible flow of pilgrims and rituals lies a mobile workforce that enables the event's functioning—an economy of vendors, service providers, transporters, artisans, and performers who arrive days or even weeks in advance to prepare for the influx of devotees. These individuals are not simply economic actors but cultural participants whose labour is embedded in familial memory, ritual meaning, and regional mobility. Their presence demonstrates how large-scale congregations are not only spiritual events but also sites of productive and socially embedded labour (Breman, 2013; Srivastava, 2020). Snan Melas offer opportunities for seasonal entrepreneurship, especially to those from rural or semi-urban regions in Bihar, eastern Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh. Fieldwork in both Varanasi and Ayodhya found that most vendors—whether selling tea, ritual items, or bangles—had a migratory work pattern aligned with the Hindu religious calendar. Many travelled from one festival to another throughout the year, forming a religious labour circuit that allowed them to combine devotional journeys with economic

sustenance (Morinis, 1984). In this model, the sacred and the economic are not opposing realms but intertwined logics of everyday life.

Caste plays a role in shaping occupational niches, but it is neither deterministic nor static. In Varanasi, for instance, we met a group of Kumhar (potter caste) vendors from Bhadohi district who had diversified into plastic toys and LED-lit diyas. They saw this shift not as a rejection of tradition but as an adaptation to changing consumer preferences. "The new diya also shines," said one vendor, "and the light still goes to the gods." Such statements reflect how caste-linked professions have transformed within the sacred economy—offering continuity as well as innovation (Jodhka, 2014). While many vendors operate within caste-based occupational knowledge—such as Mallahs assisting with river access, Yadavs selling dairy-based sweets, or Brahmins offering astrological consultations— there is also a significant degree of occupational mobility. Younger members of vendor families often take up digital payment systems, sell souvenirs, or act as freelance guides. The rise of digital literacy and e-wallets has especially empowered youth and women, allowing them to handle transactions independently or participate in business planning. Yet caste continues to mediate access to prime vending locations, informal protections, and credit. In both field sites, dominant-caste vendors were more likely to be located along main thoroughfares and had established relationships with local officials or religious committees. Scheduled Caste (SC) vendors—especially those selling food or low-cost ritual items—often occupied peripheral locations, near sanitation zones or traffic diversions. While this did not necessarily prevent them from earning a livelihood, it did shape the volume of their sales and their ability to expand operations.

Importantly, these inequalities are neither uniform nor uncontested. In Ayodhya, a cooperative of Dalit women vendors had successfully secured a cluster of stalls selling sindoor, bangles, and devotional posters. Their stall area was clean, well-lit, and collectively managed. One of the cooperative leaders explained: "We came as helpers earlier. Now we run our own business. The Mela is not just for the big ones." This example illustrates how Snan Melas can also become sites of social mobility and agency—especially when vendor groups organise and articulate their demands constructively (Harriss-White, 2003).

Gender plays a critical, though often overlooked, role in the Mela labour economy. Women are present not only as sellers of ritual items or food but also as labourers in stall construction, sanitation, and logistics. Many women vendors described the Mela as a unique space where religious legitimacy provided them with social permission to work publicly. While challenges remain—especially in terms of safety, mobility after dark, and access to toilets—the overall sentiment was that Snan Melas provided a relatively enabling environment for economic participation. A bangle-seller in Varanasi said, "This is Ram's city. We work with respect here."

Children were also visible in vendor households, assisting with packing items, managing change, or calling out to customers. While this involvement is often informal and framed as "helping the family," it raises important questions about the intergenerational transfer of informal labour. At the same time, many families stressed the role of Mela income in financing school fees or health costs back home. These dual realities—participation in work and investment in upward mobility—characterise much of India's

informal economy and deserve careful, empathetic understanding rather than blanket moral condemnation (Banerjee & Duflo, 2011). A key dimension of labour in the Mela is mobility, not just geographic but also aspirational. Most vendors and workers travel as family units or in occupational clusters, sharing costs and pooling risks. Routes are carefully chosen to maximise opportunity: a vendor may begin at Magh Mela in Prayagraj, move to Kartik Snan in Varanasi, and then onward to regional fairs in Bundelkhand or Jharkhand. These circuits allow for predictable income cycles and foster regional economic integration through informal networks. For many, these circuits are also emotional journeys—of memory, prayer, and return.

This mobility also entails embedded knowledge—of where to set up, how to secure space, what items sell best at different Melas, and how to respond to unexpected changes in weather, security, or pilgrim flow. Such tactical know-how is passed down across generations, forming what anthropologist James Ferguson (1999) describes as "situated competencies" rooted in experience rather than formal training. One photographer in Ayodhya explained, "I know when the crowd will turn, where the sun hits best, when the police will clear us. This is not written in books." While these workers operate largely outside formal employment structures, they are by no means disorganised. Vendor associations, informal savings groups, caste panchayats, and cooperative bodies help maintain order, resolve disputes, and offer mutual aid in case of illness, injury, or displacement.

These support systems are often stronger than formal grievance mechanisms and reflect the institutional intelligence of informal economies (Lindell, 2010).

Finally, the value of Mela labour must be understood not only in economic but also cultural and civic terms. These workers contribute to the sacred atmosphere of the event, ensuring that pilgrims have access to everything from prayer items to food and entertainment. They are custodians of ritual practice, oral history, and spatial familiarity. Their work, while often rendered invisible in policy narratives, is central to the aesthetic and functional success of Snan Melas.

NEGOTIATING LEGALITY: REGULATION, SURVEILLANCE, AND ACCESS

Large-scale religious congregations like the Snan Melas necessitate extraordinary planning and administrative coordination. Managing a temporary city—often populated by hundreds of thousands of pilgrims—demands not just crowd control, sanitation, and security, but also a system of inclusive regulation that accommodates the diverse actors who make the event function. Among these actors, informal vendors and service providers stand out for their ubiquity and contribution, yet their legal and spatial status within the Mela remains fluid, negotiated, and often precarious. Understanding this dynamic reveals much about the evolving relationship between informal labour and public governance in India. In recent years, state governments—especially in Uttar Pradesh—have made significant efforts to professionalise the management of religious events. The Ayodhya Deepotsav and Ram Navami Mela, for example, saw the introduction of digital ID cards for vendors, formal stall allocation through municipal offices, and the involvement of police, civic volunteers, and fire services in vendor zone planning.

Similarly, in Varanasi, Mela-specific guidelines are issued by the district magistrate's office and Nagar Nigam, outlining no-vending zones, sanitation responsibilities, and temporary vending permissions. These interventions signal a growing recognition of the economic centrality and logistical relevance of informal vendors (Kumar, 2022).

However, this recognition often comes in partial and uneven ways. Field observations and interviews suggest that while some vendors obtain official permissions—usually paper-based, valid for 5 to 15 days—many continue to operate through informal understandings or long-standing relationships with local authorities. These vendors may not possess official documentation but are tolerated because of their familiarity, track record of discipline, or alignment with temple committees or local associations. This condition reflects what Bhan (2016) calls "graduated sovereignty"—a model in which the state exercises selective control, allowing some actors to flourish while keeping others at the margins.

Importantly, this system does not necessarily work to the detriment of the vendors. Many see it as a manageable, even productive, form of vernacular governance—a blend of official and social recognition that values participation and continuity. In Ayodhya, a group of toy sellers explained that while they lacked formal permits, their family had been selling at the same location since the early 2000s and had an understanding with the local ward councillor. "They know us," one vendor remarked, "and they also know we keep our area clean and follow the rules. That is enough." These informal relationships are sustained not by evasion, but by a logic of mutual trust and civic performance.

Still, regulatory challenges remain. Spatial zoning, for example, is often planned with safety and visibility in mind, but it can unintentionally push marginalised vendors to less visible areas. Prime vending locations—near river access points or temple gates—are sometimes restricted to those with strong political or social ties. During the 2023 Kartik Snan in Varanasi, several vendors reported being moved from their usual spots due to last-minute changes in security arrangements, leading to loss of business. This reinforces the need for predictable and participatory mechanisms of space allocation, where informal actors have a voice in planning processes (Sen, 2020).

Gender adds another layer of complexity. Women vendors are more likely to face scrutiny—not only for legality but also for the "appropriateness" of their presence in religious space. While female-led stalls are increasingly common, women often lack access to formal permits, face moral policing, or are assigned peripheral zones with limited amenities. In Varanasi, a group of female vendors selling vermilion and bangles shared how they were asked to shut down early during VIP visits, despite adhering to all rules. "We never shout, we don't block the path," one vendor said. "But we are still asked to move first." Such practices underline the importance of gender-sensitive regulation that affirms women's right to work in public religious spaces (Phadke, 2011).

A promising development in both field sites was the use of digital tools to streamline communication and monitoring. In Ayodhya, vendor WhatsApp groups were used to circulate updates on stall inspections, changes in route maps & sanitation announcements. Some vendor

used QR-based payment systems, which not only facilitated business but also acted as de facto registration, with customers leaving ratings or feedback. While digitalisation does not replace the need for formal rights, it has begun to offer new modalities of recognition and traceability, especially for younger or tech-savvy vendors (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2020).

At the same time, technological solutions are not universally accessible. Vendors without smartphones, formal ID cards, or digital literacy —often older individuals or those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds—face difficulties in complying with new systems. A flower seller in Ayodhya explained: "My son knows how to use UPI, but I only take cash. They said next year everyone must register online. What if I can't?" This concern reflects a broader need for inclusive digital transitions, where training and multilingual support are provided to ensure equity.

Another key point of negotiation between vendors and authorities is sanitation. With increasing focus on cleanliness under initiatives like Swachh Mela and Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, vendors are expected to maintain hygiene near their stalls. While most agree with these principles, they also require practical support— such as nearby waste bins, water points, and designated dumping areas. In both field sites, several vendors voluntarily coordinated cleanliness through collective efforts. In Varanasi, a group of food vendors hired a sweeper to maintain their shared lane and created a rotating schedule for cleaning duties. "Clean space means more customers," said one vendor, "and it also keeps the police happy." These practices suggest that compliance grows when

stakeholders feel ownership, not when rules are imposed top-down.

In general, Snan Mela governance is evolving toward a co-produced model, where informal actors, municipal bodies, police, and local religious committees interact in iterative, situation-specific ways. This approach reflects the strengths of Indian statecraft in religious public space: adaptive, negotiated, and relational rather than rigidly bureaucratic (Chatterjee, 2004). Challenges remain—especially around transparency, spatial equity, and predictability— but the experience of both Varanasi and Ayodhya points to the potential for inclusive planning that respects both sacred ethos and economic dignity.

To improve the functioning and inclusivity of vendor ecosystems at Snan Melas, several constructive steps could be undertaken by event organizers and local authorities. First, dedicated vendor facilitation centres can be established at the Mela site to provide real-time support for dispute resolution, stall allocation, and grievance redressal, ensuring smoother coordination and timely redress of concerns. In the lead-up to the event, multilingual and visually intuitive vending guidelines—including maps and designated vending zones—should be widely disseminated to help vendors navigate the space more effectively. Additionally, temporary digital literacy kiosks could be set up to assist vendors in registering their businesses, understanding the basics of UPI-based transactions, and accessing emergency services, thereby promoting digital inclusion. Finally, the sanitation aspect of vending clusters could be improved by encouraging participatory cleanliness drives, with recognition or small rewards for vendor groups maintaining hygienic

stalls. These measures would not only enhance the working conditions for informal vendors but also contribute to the overall sustainability and orderliness of the Mela.

Such steps would not only ease vendor-state interactions but also enhance the overall experience of the Mela, affirming its spirit as a people's event rooted in faith, sustained by enterprise, and enriched by cooperation.

ORAL HISTORIES AND SEASONAL ASPIRATIONS

While institutional frameworks and informal networks shape much of the Snan Mela economy, its true texture is often revealed through the lived experiences of those who return, year after year, to work, worship, and inhabit these sacred congregations. These workers—vendors, barbers, tea sellers, photographers, and artisans—not only contribute to the event's vitality but also develop emotional attachments to the spaces and social worlds that emerge during Melas. Their stories, passed on across generations, construct a powerful archive of sacred economic memory—blending livelihood with longing, spirituality with survival.

Field interviews in Varanasi and Ayodhya revealed a striking consistency in the language of return. Phrases such as "hamara sthaan yahi hai" (this is our place) or "bachpan se aa rahe hain" (we've been coming since childhood) were common across age groups and professions. A 63-year-old herbal oil vendor in Varanasi described the Kartik Snan Mela as his "seasonal home", recalling how he had first come with his father in the early 1970s, carrying a sack of oils

and setting up under a neem tree at the ghat. "I still come to the same tree," he smiled. "I know its shade, and it knows me." These relationships with place transcend commercial interest—they reflect the emotional geography of the Mela (Tuan, 1977).

Oral histories also show how the Mela economy is intergenerational. Many of the younger vendors interviewed were children or grandchildren of earlier Mela workers. In Ayodhya, a 22-year-old QR-code-savvy toy seller explained how his grandfather once sold wooden whistles during Ram Navami, carrying them in a cloth bundle on his shoulder. "Now we take online payments," he said proudly, "but our family's spot is still here." These narratives of continuity serve as a form of economic heritage, where occupation is tied not just to survival but to family honour, collective memory, and ritual participation (Lynch, 1990).

Crucially, many workers do not view their engagement with the Mela as marginal or desperate. Instead, they articulate a sense of aspiration and dignity, framing their work as an opportunity rather than a last resort. While their income is often modest and seasonal, it provides capital for agriculture, education, or home repairs in their villages.

A women's cooperative selling devotional bangles in Ayodhya had saved enough to fund a brick boundary wall for their village school. "This is not just Mela money," one member explained. "It is progress for our children." Such stories challenge the stereotype of informal labour as stagnant or unambitious, instead highlighting its developmental role in everyday life (Banerjee & Duflo, 2011).

Faith is not just a backdrop but a structuring presence in these aspirations. Many vendors explicitly linked their economic ambitions to spiritual ethics. A tea vendor near Varanasi's Raj Ghat shared how he donates a day's earnings annually to a local cow shelter and believes his prosperity depends on "serving pilgrims with clean hands and a clean heart." This ethos of service, or seva, adds an additional layer of meaning to otherwise mundane labour. Sacred spaces, in this context, are not simply sites of ritual but moral economies, where values, intentions, and actions are co-produced (Scott, 1976; Srivastava, 2020).

These narratives also contain elements of resilience and adaptation. Vendors often recalled hardships—sudden rainfall, crowd crushes, or changing police regulations—but spoke of them not as deterrents, but as challenges to be outwitted. One photographer who roams the Mela with a portable printer explained how he deals with erratic electricity: "I use a solar battery. That way, no matter what happens, I am ready." This spirit of jugaad—creative problem-solving within constraints—is deeply embedded in the Indian informal sector and evident in the daily lives of Mela workers (Sharma, 2015).

Importantly, aspirations were not limited to income or survival. Several young workers spoke of upward mobility and skill development. In Varanasi, a group of young men who previously sold fruit juice at the Mela had pooled their savings to start a mobile snack van, now licensed to operate near pilgrimage sites across eastern UP. Their story was one of scaling through sacred circuits, where the experience and earnings from religious events served as a platform for formalised business. "The Mela taught us

discipline," one of them said. "It taught us how to talk to people, handle rush, and work under pressure."

Women's narratives added another dimension of aspiration: visibility and social recognition. In Ayodhya, a bangle-seller explained that participating in the Mela gave her "a voice outside the home." Her stall, she said, was not just about earnings, but about dignity in public space. She added, "Even the police know me now. They call me didi. That is respect." Such forms of identity transformation—enabled through sacred commerce—are subtle but powerful expressions of empowerment, particularly in traditionally patriarchal social settings (Phadke, 2011).

Many narratives also emphasized a desire for stability, not necessarily through formalisation, but through greater predictability, fairness, and dignity. Workers did not always demand permanent licenses or fixed stalls; instead, they wished for consistent access, fair treatment, clean working conditions, and minimal disruption during high-security events. "We do not need big favors," said one chaiwala. "Just don't move us without telling us." These are calls for procedural justice, not entitlements—suggesting a pragmatic and cooperative attitude toward governance (Sen, 2020).

Finally, the Mela is also a space of collective imagination. Vendors often spoke of what they would do "if things go well this year"—send their daughter to nursing school, repair the roof, or expand their product line. These statements reflect future-oriented narratives, often grounded in deep uncertainty, yet carried forward by faith and habit. In this way, Snan Melas become more

than seasonal markets—they are economic rituals of hope, marked by repetition, resilience, and renewal.

In capturing these oral histories and seasonal aspirations, this section argues that informal work at the Mela is not a residual or invisible domain—it is a lived, storied, and strategic engagement with sacred time, public space, and livelihood opportunity. These actors do not merely fill gaps in state planning; they animate the very spirit of the Mela, fusing economic agency with devotional intensity. Listening to their stories not only humanises the Mela economy but also invites us to reimagine informal labour not as disorder but as an embedded form of social intelligence and cultural continuity.

CONCLUSION

Snan Melas, as this paper has shown, are not only grand spiritual congregations but also dynamic social spaces where labour, livelihood, and belief are interwoven into a rich cultural fabric. While popular and policy narratives often spotlight the rituals, scale, or logistical challenges of such events, this study reveals the everyday human economy that makes the Mela possible—through small acts of commerce, quiet routines of service, and the deeply personal journeys of seasonal workers who return each year with devotion and determination.

The seasonal economy of Snan Melas thrives on informality, but not in the sense of disorganisation or dysfunction. Rather, it is a form of adaptive economic practice, grounded in kinship networks, caste-based occupational knowledge, and evolving technological skills.

Workers operate within tacit systems of order, fairness, and cooperation that, while outside formal planning documents, reflect significant institutional intelligence. These arrangements help regulate space, share resources, and mediate access in ways that are both effective and respectful of the Mela's sacred ethos.

At the same time, this paper has argued that greater institutional support for informal workers can enhance—not hinder—the Mela's civic and spiritual outcomes. The most successful examples observed in Varanasi and Ayodhya were those where municipal authorities, police, and vendors engaged in dialogue, shared responsibility, and co-produced solutions. Cleanliness campaigns worked best when vendors felt ownership; digital payments gained traction when linked with inclusion and literacy; and space allocation was most equitable when grounded in mutual recognition and transparent rules.

What emerges, then, is a model of vernacular governance that offers important lessons beyond the Mela. In a time when cities are grappling with how to integrate informality into formal systems without erasing local livelihoods, Snan Melas demonstrate the possibility of hybrid planning frameworks that are both inclusive and efficient. These events showcase how ritual time can be harmonised with civic time—where faith and administration work not at cross-purposes but in generative partnership.

Crucially, the Snan Mela economy is not merely transactional. It is deeply affective and aspirational. For many workers, the Mela is not just a market—it is a place of memory, family history, and spiritual purpose. Their stories show how sacred congregations create opportunities

for identity transformation, social visibility, and intergenerational mobility. These vendors do not see themselves as marginal; they are proud participants in the cultural continuity of the event and view their work as dignified, meaningful, and even devotional.

By documenting this sacred economy and the people who sustain it, this paper contributes to a growing body of literature that sees religious life not as separate from material concerns, but as a lived practice where spirituality, labour, and community intersect (Lynch, 1990; Srivastava, 2020). It also offers a corrective to reductive discourses that see informality only through the lens of regulation or risk. In the context of Snan Melas, informality is not just tolerated—it is generative, co-productive, and, at times, even sacred.

Going forward, more attention should be given to supporting these economies through inclusive planning, social protection mechanisms, and recognition frameworks that value the lived knowledge of informal actors. As cities prepare for increasingly complex gatherings—religious, cultural, or civic—the example of Snan Melas offers a compelling blueprint for how large-scale events can be made more participatory, respectful, and economically inclusive.

In recognising the contributions of informal vendors, itinerant workers, and sacred entrepreneurs, we affirm a broader truth: that the vitality of India's sacred public life is not measured only by the number of pilgrims or the scale of infrastructure, but by the dignity, memory, and aspirations of those who serve, quietly and faithfully, along its peripheries.

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PROFESSIONALS' PERSPECTIVE ON JOB RELEVANCE: ANALYZING SKILL ADAPTATION AMID TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCEMENTS

Dikshant Sharma* and Muskan Bansal**

ABSTRACT

Rapid technological advancements and its proliferation, especially in post-COVID world spark a debate for discussion. While on one side it is said to be questioning the job relevancy among professionals on the other side it is aiding to the job ease and self-upgradation. Changing nature of job roles, job status and social conditions puts question mark over future courses of Jobs, especially in India. The study explores professional's perspective on job relevance in this context. The research aims to assess current job satisfaction, identify perceived future risks, and examine professional's attitude and barriers towards skill development. Using mixed-method approach, the study surveyed 100 professionals across various job fields. Findings reveal that while professionals acknowledge coming risks associated with technological changes, the general outlook is found to be positive. Majority respondents reported high job satisfaction and high willingness to invest in skilling, upskilling and reskilling. However, time constraints and the higher need of departmental/organizational support emerged as significant challenges. The study concludes with recommendations for both individuals and organization to foster a culture of continuous learning and adaptability. These findings and discussion contribute significantly contribute to the understanding of how professionals can navigate the evolving job market and maintain relevance in their careers amidst technological disruptions.

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 acquainted world with 'new normal'. Though the term 'new normal' was coined during the financial crisis of 2008 (El-Erian, 2010), it reappeared during COVID-19 pandemic to point out how the pandemic transformed human life, including economic subsistence, professional identity, work-family organization, education and others, and, in turn, demanding a radical re-vision of the traditional ways of living, practices and skills used to manage them (McKinsey & Co, 2021; World Economic Forum, 2020) . Post-COVID world is following the trend of new normal with respect to technological rapid advancements. As we know, technological progress is been a defining force in shaping of human history, however the rate of innovation and dissemination has not been constant (Gordon, 2016). Over the last few centuries, technological advancements were slow and even slower was the reach to grassroot levels. From steam engines, telephone, gasoline powered automobile, electricity in 19th century to Ford's mass production techniques, computers, internet of 20th century, the 21st century world is highly pragmatic with development from 2G to 6G in a decade (ITU, 2023).

Modern times, especially post covid world witnessing unprecedented acceleration in technological upgradation. New technologies like Augmented Realities, Virtual Realities, Internet of Things, Big Data Analytics, Artificial Intelligence, Robotics Process Automations,

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Additive Manufacturing or 3D Printing, Cloud Computing, Cyber Security, Blockchain, 6G etc are proliferating in fields not just one but diverse including education, manufacturing, services, logistics, healthcare, finance, banking, agriculture, etc (World Economic Forum, 2023). Technological advancements and changing social order put a common global challenge across fields of Job which is to 'staying relevant' (Bessen, 2019). Machines and softwares are increasingly performing tasks that were once done by humans especially in industries such as manufacturing, logistics, retail where robots and AI-driven systems are being deployed to handle repetitive tasks. Now the AI has begun to penetrate knowledge-based jobs as well. Algorithms now assist in decision making, data analysis and even creative tasks such as content generation – text, audio and now videos (Katz & Krueger, 2019).

While this presents opportunities for improved efficiencies, it also raises concerns about human replacements in fields like finance, law, healthcare, journalism etc. The skills needed to remain relevant in today's job market are changing faster than ever before. Professionals are finding that skills they mastered just a few years ago may no longer be sufficient (Schwab & Zahidi, 2020). There is a growing emphasis on lifelong learning and reskilling.

Along with this, there is a rise in remote work that has opened up competition on a global scale. Professionals are now competing with talent from across the world, which often comes at a lower cost. This has raised concerns about job security (ILO, 2021). Outsourcing is a major problem in fields like customer service, IT support, software development etc.

Newly emerging Gig Economy has altered traditional career paths. Short-term, freelance, contract-based nature of jobs is now replacing the lucrative stability of long-term employment (Spreitzer et al., 2017). While it allows flexibility, it also creates uncertainty regarding income and career progression, contributing to the feeling of insecurity and job irrelevance. Though many jobs are opting for hybrid model of working – remote and field, human creativity with technology, but it is the constant demand of staying relevant which is causing stress about grim future (Eurofound, 2021).

Future-proofing through skill development is the only viable solution to job relevancy, still professionals organizations and industries are hesitant to adopt skills due to rising cost, limited availability of good quality trainers, limited industry-academia collaboration, gender disparity, already long work hours, unorganized sectors, informal workers, among others. Rising tide of educated unemployed youth put question mark over demographic dividend on India's quest for Viksit Bharat @ 2047 (NITI Aayog, 2023).

Presenting this one side of argument is not enough when we are looking at job relevancy holistically. If we look at data on employment growth in India we see contrasting trends. While Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE, 2024) offers less optimistic view by finding that unemployment rate reached 9.2% in June 2024 from 7% in May. Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) Capital, Labour, Energy Materials, Services (KLEMS) data reports a 6% increase in job growth for financial year 2024, a significant rise from the 3.2% growth in financial year 2023 (RBI, 2024).

Writing views of C. Rangarajan (former governor, RBI) the incongruence between growth in output and labour absorption due to technology changes resulting in the decline of employment elasticity (Rangarajan, 2023). The substitution of labour by machines has a long history with innovations often resulting in simultaneous increase in output and employment.

The so-called 'new normal' is not just a survival strategy but a springboard for unprecedented growth, efficiency and creativity, at least for India. COVID being once in a lifetime phenomenon forced rapid adaptation to new technologies and work structures which again is part of 'new normal' (World Bank, 2022). The technology which earlier was seen as foe in workspace is now a colleague which whether a professional likes or not is an irreplaceable part of workplace(s). This quintessentially means that in India job relevancy among youth is increasing with high technological adaptations. Technology enables professionals to find new opportunities and work in efficient manner. Technology adaptors are not fighting for 'staying relevant' but for 'staying updated' (Schwab, 2016).

The key problem doesn't lies in technology advancement but in technology adaptation. While professionals do feel pressure with every new technology update, it is equally true that it is the technology itself which has democratized the culture of continuous growth by accessing world class education and skilling programs at a click (OECD, 2021). As the digital landscape continues to evolve, the need for upskilling is not a burden anymore.

This study stands at the cross juncture of these ideological paradoxes which is keen to find the human replacement aspect of technologies versus the human refinement aspects of technologies.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1. ngarajan & Rubasree (2024), Up-skilling and Re-skilling: A Strategic Response to Changing Skill Demands. The study target population is automotive sector of Chennai. The study test hypotheses of positive impact of upskilling and reskilling of employees on their career drive, engagement and talent mobility. The study is suited for personal self-development through skilling. The study focused on employees' effort on upskilling and reskilling while sidelining the role of organization.

2. Yadav, S. (2024), Developing Twenty-first Century Skills Among Youth: Opportunities and Challenges in Skill Development Across the Globe. The qualitative study explored different nation and companies' strategy to increase skill development for future workforce. The study suggests that to retain the balance of demand and supply in labour market, the skill gaps need to be brought into consideration by stakeholders such as government, businesses, education institutes to provide tailored made solutions for skill gaps. Looking at organizational point of view regarding 21st century skills, this paper falls short on focusing on professionals' personal aspirations of upskilling.

3. Kuar et al (2023), An Explorative Factor Analysis of Competency Mapping for IT Professionals. The study though evaluates the management teams of IT companies, to find the blend of skills required to create cohesive team and deliver high-quality work. They take into account HR processes, talent acquisition,

induction, training and development, assessment etc. The study finds that it is the middle level of management that brings diverse skillsets than levels below and above. Despite good sample size, the study was limited to IT professionals only. This study is aimed to look at professionals across fields of services.

4. Tomar, G., Mishra, S. K. (2023), Work and career-related features of technology: A grounded theory of study of software professionals. The grounded research aimed to find the perception and career expectations are instrumental in deciding the positive or negative evaluation of new technologies. Software professionals and technologies engage in a dyadic relationship which the study conceptualize as a 'Person-Technology fit '. Study falls short on having macro view of general perspective of professionals regarding skilling and future-proofing through technology adaptations.

5. George, R., Paul, B., (2022), Unravelling the interplay between competencies, career preparedness, and perceived employability among postgraduate students: a structural model analysis. The study analysed the role of High Education Institute in promoting the development of competencies for employability. Study collected quantitative data from 389 postgraduate students enrolled in a generic stream from Kerala. The paper proposes and tests a structural model of relationships between the perceived competencies of the postgraduates and their perceived career preparedness and, subsequently, perceived employability. Though this paper focus on employability it does not take into account skilling, upskilling and reskilling aspects of professionals already engaged in service sector.

6. Jaiswal et al (2021), Rebooting employees: Upskilling for artificial intelligence in multinational corporations (in-press). The study advocates that AI have envisioned a future in which computers with intelligence will do repetitive activities that people currently undertake, freeing up humans to work on more creative projects. Using Gioia's technique for qualitative research, the inquiry found 5 critical skills for upskilling. The study discussed that the potential adverse impact of AI in terms of Job replacement can be meaningfully redirected into an employee's skill development. Paper only focus on AI and into account skilling, upskilling and reskilling aspects of professionals already engaged in service sector.

OBJECTIVES

- To evaluate the relevance and satisfaction of current job roles among professionals by the alignment between professionals' current roles and their personal interests.

- To identify the perceived risk factors and future skill requirements for current job roles.

- To investigate the willingness and barriers to skill development and investment among professionals.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies to examine professionals' perspectives on job relevance. Quantitative data was collected through a structured survey administered to 100 professionals using Google

Forms, comprising Likert scale items, closed-ended questions, and other formats to capture diverse aspects such as job satisfaction, perceived risks, and attitudes toward skill development. For the qualitative component, focused group interviews and field inquiries were conducted to gather additional insights into the challenges and barriers faced by professionals.

Data analysis was performed using bar diagrams, pie charts, and descriptive interpretation in MS Excel to visually represent trends and summarize findings. This integrated approach ensured a comprehensive understanding of professionals' perspectives, combining numerical data with contextual analysis to support the objectives of the study.

DATA ANALYSIS

The study has used a mixed methodology to use qualitative data in quantitative terms. Options are being provided with each question to make respondent's choices and align study towards the objectives. The study has taken precisely 100 respondents across professional categories like Researcher, Software Developer, Content Creator among others. The study has also incorporated various demographic details like age group, gender, work status (full time, part time, freelancing), work experience and income range. Demographic Profile has been shown as pie chart below.
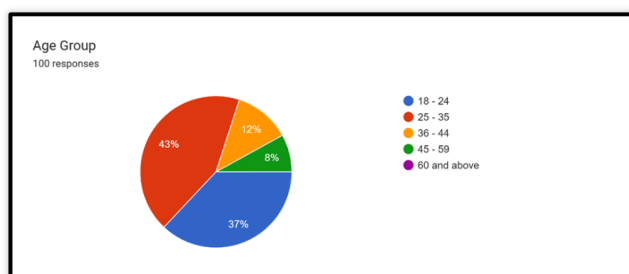
Age Group

Figure 1 of Age group among 100 respondents shows that a diverse set of population participating in the study. Majority respondents are from 25-35 age category (43%), followed by 18-24 years old (37%), 36-44 constitutes 12% of the study while 45-59 are 8%. There was no data collected from respondents from age category of 60 and above. It is interesting to observe that majority (here whopping 80%) of respondents are under 35, much like India's current population age structure. The heterogenous nature of age structure help build a comprehensive stance as concentrating on one particular age group may skew the entire study very unidirectional. Different age structure from young to old help us understand the differences in perceived factor of technological risk and job insecurity amid rapid advancements.
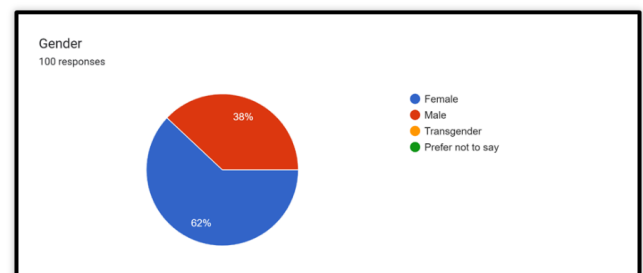
Gender

Though the study is not particularly focusing upon women but having this aspect is important amid rising awareness regarding female labour force participation. It is a moment of delight to see in Figure 2 that 62% women taken part in the study who themselves are in labour force. Male stood at 38%. The study though intended to be non-binary and more gender inclusive but sadly it didn't reach the Third Gender.
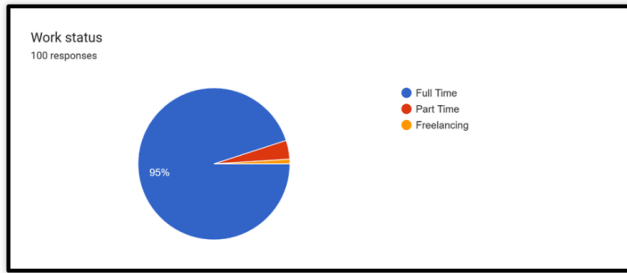
Work Status

Figure 3 represents work status. This is particularly relevant in today's day and age where social media and corporate world is increasingly buzzing about non-traditional work models like freelancing and gig economy, our study shows that 95% of respondents are full time employee in an organisation or self-employed. 5% combined showed part-time and freelancing work status.
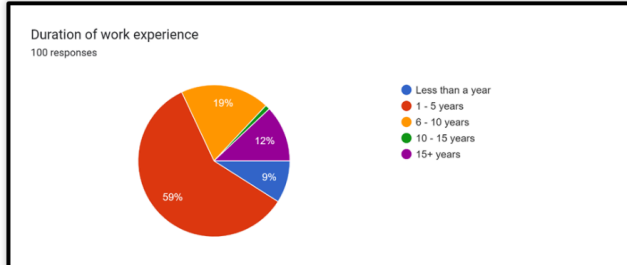
Work Experience

Work experience of respondents helped us delve deep into 'perspective' individuals have despite having same field or area of work with respect to job insecurity amid looming threat of advancing technologies and skill changes. Figure 4 represents work experience of our 100 respondents. Work experience of 59% respondents is 1-5 years along with 19% with 6-10 years of work experience and 9% of less than one year which is confirming the lion's share of young

population in figure 1 of age structure. 12% of respondents are with experience 15 years and above, rest having work experience of 10-15 years.
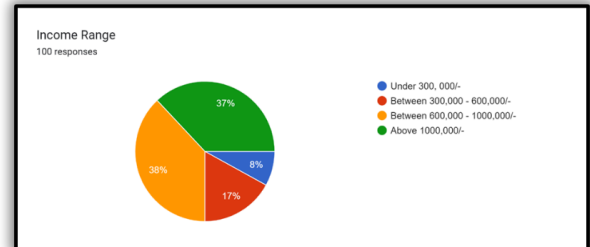
Income Range

The study particularly incorporated Income Range as an important part of the study to find the challenges towards skill development and technology adaptations.

In India, with large rich-poor divide, rising middle class, and faulty per capita income levels, monetary factors are chief barriers towards skill and technology adaptations. Among 100 respondents, more or less equal are respondents with income range between 600,000-1000,000/- and Above 1000,000/- (38% and 37% respectively), 17% are in between 300,000-600,000/- and 8% are under 300,000/- income category. (All figures are in Indian Rupee).

The demographic details of the study show a diverse set of population, varying age groups to income groups. This heterogenic sample create paradox of differences in view of future with rapid technological advancements. Though google forms limits our ability to see individual responses and trace the chain of responsive behavior but demographic profile help in systematic review of responses.

Second part of the forms deals with questions in objective type format to help limit respondents' answers to the objectives of the study. The study has used scale but instead of 1-5, the study has used terminologies like Highly, Adequately, Somewhat, Limited, Not at all; to provide mental frame of answering. There are in total 13 mandatory questions, each duly filled by all hundred respondents. The analysis of each question is as follows-
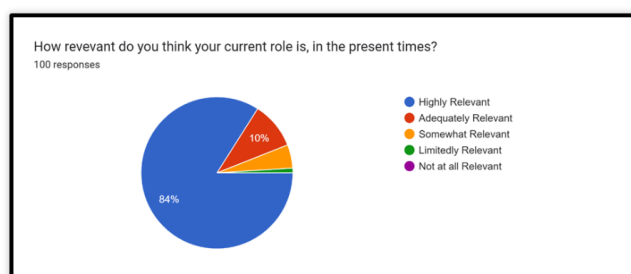

Figure 6 Relevancy of Occupational Activity

Figure 6 shows the relevancy of occupational activity. It is derived from the question of our study which is 'How relevant do you think your current role is, in the present times?'. It is essential prerequisite to know about current job relevancy to concretely analyse the future job relevancy amid dynamic global order.

Among hundred respondents 84% find their job highly relevant in present times, 10% are those who are adequately relevant for today's job market, 4% find themselves somewhat relevant while 2% see themselves limitedly relevant. We find no responses from individuals who see no relevance of their present work role. The inference can be drawn that across age group, gender, level of income all respondents see relevance of their roles in present time, with differing degree of course.
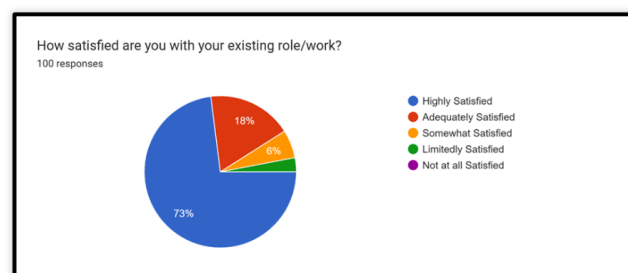

Figure 7 Job Satisfaction

Figure 7 deals with level of job satisfaction amid changing technologies. This is important to build perspective regarding job insecurity, both psychological and actual. 73% of respondents are found to be highly satisfied while 18% are adequately satisfied. 6% respondents are somewhat satisfied and remaining are either limitedly satisfied or not satisfied at all. From this it could be interfered that it is that limited share limitedly satisfied with those who are not at all satisfied are those who are highly insecure about the future.
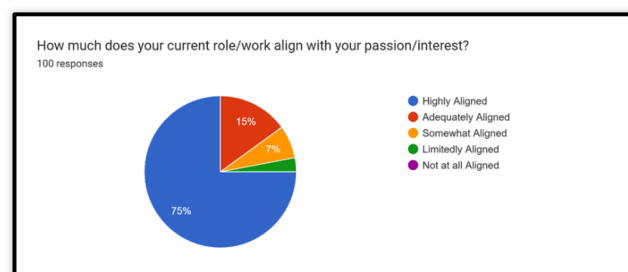

Figure 8 Assessing how much current role of respondent(s) align with their passion

By assessing how much does respondents' current role aligns with their passion or interest, we can reconfirm the job satisfaction levels of respondents in current times. Like figure 7, figure 8 more or less has similar reaction. 75% of respondents feel their current role is highly

aligned towards their passion. 15% feel it is adequately aligned, for 7% it is somewhat aligned and for the rest it is either limitedly aligned not aligned at all.
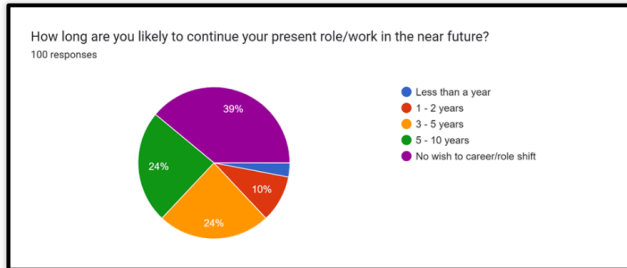

Figure 9 Assessing how long respondent(s) are likely to continue their present role at work

Figure 9 represents the likeliness of respondents to continue their present role. It is interesting to observe that despite more than 70% of respondents who view their job to be highly satisfied and highly aligned with their passion, only 39% are willing to continue their current role. 24% each opined for 5-10 years and 3-5 years to serve in current job role. 10% want to change in 1-2 years and we see 3% who are quick to change their present role at work, in just a year.

Figure 10 Technology Usage

Continuing the previous question, next question tries to identify the technological aspects of such opinion regarding career/role shifts, if any. Figure 10 revealed that 42% of respondents highly use cutting-edge technology in their jobs, 32% opined adequately, 17% find themselves somewhat using cutting-edge technologies, 17% have limited use and rest said not at all.

Figure 11 Future relevance of current skillset
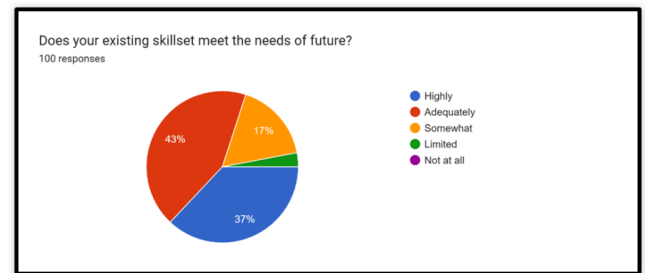
Figure 11 show that 37% respondents are highly optimistic about their existing skillsets to meet the needs of future job roles. Majority that is 43% respondents find their existing skillset will adequately fulfil their job requirements. 17% see their current skillsets to be somewhat helpful for future and rest opined limited and not at all.
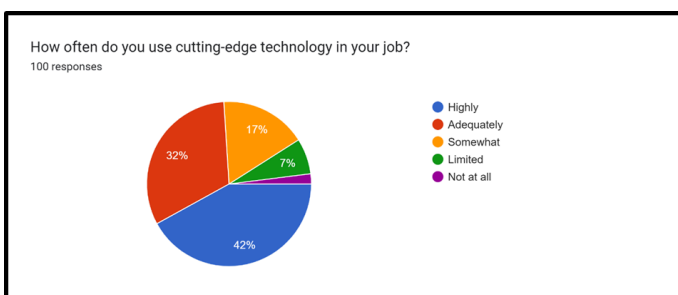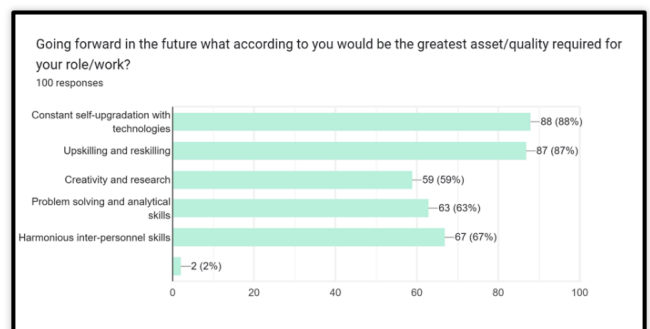

Figure 12 Future skill requirements

Relating to figure 11, figure 12 reveals what percentage of respondents finds the greatest asset/quality required for future job role. 88% viewed 'constant self-upgradation with technologies', 87% view upskilling and reskilling. 59% parted ways towards creativity and research, for 63% it is about problem solving and analytical skills. For 67% it is harmonious inter-personnel skills which can help them stay relevant in future. 2% share to other qualities as well.
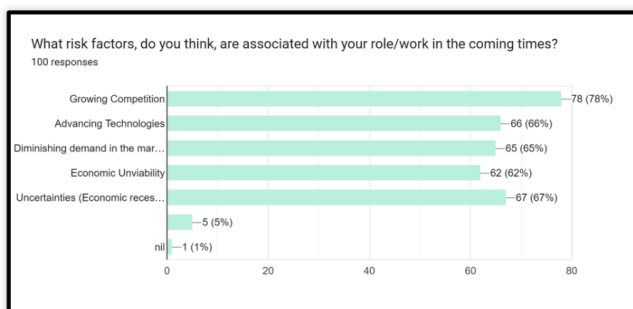
The study assumes 'the skill' to be the factor which can help abate the risk of job insecurity. Following this assumption, figure 14 finds that 45% of respondents' organisation is highly involved in investing in employee reskilling and upskilling. 24% voted adequate, 18% somewhat, 9% indicated limited; organisational investing attitude towards employee upskilling and reskilling.

Figure 13 Perceived risk factors
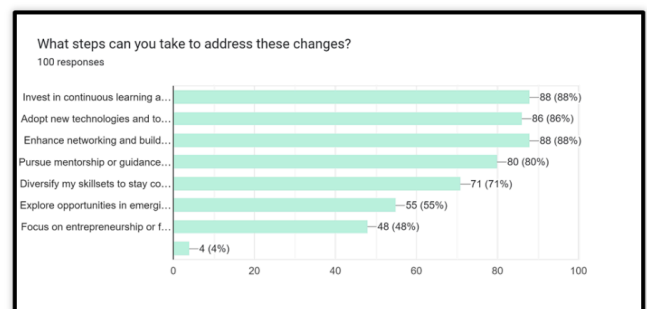
Figure 15 Actionable steps and skill development required to abate future risks pertaining job security

Risk is among chief factor of finding job insecurity. Figure 13 shows that 78% respondents agree with growing competition, 66% view advancing technologies, 65% see diminishing market demand, 62% find economic unviability while 67% feel it is uncertainties like economic recession etc to be the risk factors that are associated with their work in coming times.

Figure 15 suggests the respondents' attitude towards abate future risks pertaining to job insecurity. It revealed that

1. 88% will invest in continuous learning and reskilling like online courses, certification etc.
2. 86% adopt to new technologies and tools related to their field of work.
3. 88% will help themselves by enhancing networking and by building professional connections.
4. 80% will pursue mentorship or guidance from industry experts.
5. 71% will diversify their skillsets to stay competitive.
6. 55% will explore opportunities in emerging industries.
7. 48% will focus on entrepreneurship or freelancing opportunities.
8. 4% said other steps they would take.

Figure 14 Organisational Support

Figure 16 Limiting factors in abating risks

Figure 16 tried to find the factors which limits respondents' ability to upgrade in their skillsets. 57% find time constraints, for 25% the monetary constraints, for 21% it is lack of departmental support, for 40% of respondents it is quantum of responsibilities that prevents them in upskilling. 18% said no factor is limiting them, thus choose to invest in skill upgradation come what may.
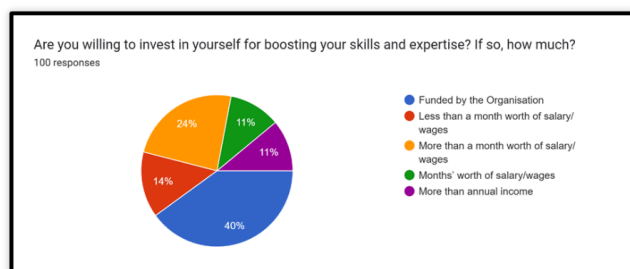
Figure 17 Assessing respondent(s) willingness to invest in skill development

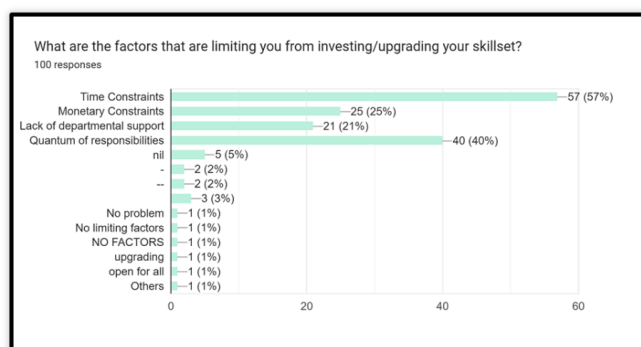Figure 17 shows the respondents' monetary willingness to contribute towards skill development. 40% wants the skill upgradation to be fully funded by the organisation in which they are working. 14% are ready to invest less than a month worth of salary, while 24% can contribute more than a month worth of salary. 11% each are ready to invest months' worth of salary and even more than their annual income.
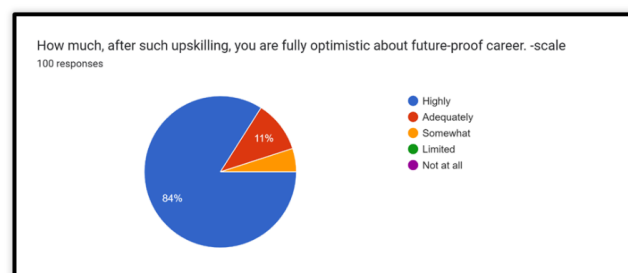
Figure 18 Optimism post skill development

The study ends the question by asking how much respondents are optimistic about future job roles after upskilling and figure 18 depicts that 84% are highly optimistic, 11% are adequately and 5% are somewhat optimistic about the future. It is happy to observe that no respondents feel negative about future after reskilling and upskilling despite rapid technological adaptions.

RESULTS

The study sticks to the objectives mentioned above which are:

1. To evaluate the relevance and satisfaction of current job roles among professionals by the alignment between professionals' current roles and their personal interests.

The study inferred from Figure 7 and Figure 8 that 73% and 75% respondents are highly satisfied and think that their current role are aligned to their passion and interest (respectively). If we include tan with respondents who are adequately satisfied then out of 100 respondents then the percentage shoots up to 91% and 90%. This is interesting to

note that the occupational activities are recorded are of diverse nature from research to professorship to data analyst to software development.This is particularly relevant in times when there is a debate about toxic work environments, 70 hours work week, mechanical nature of jobs etc. The study was very focused on this number one objective because in today's time it is the personal interest and thus sparked creativity that gives ideas out of the box. This again fuels interest levels and high achievement drives.

2. To identify the perceived risk factors and future skill requirements for current job roles.

This objective is singularly taken for the study due to the perceived looming threat of newer and rapidly advancing technologies. Artificial Intelligence is current buzzword that underscores job insecurity in double lines especially with creative jobs, next best example could be automation. The focus of this objective is on the word 'perceived' because in study we found with Figure 9 that it is 64% of respondents out of 100 who are into long term game in their current roles (5-10 years and no wish to career change). Secondly though Figure 13 revealed that multiple risk factors are present in current roles, Figure 17 finds that individuals through multiple means are willing to abate such risk by upskilling and reskilling. Figure 18 clearly shows that 84% individuals are highly optimistic about future after their skill development. The number is exact 100 per cent where no one is limitedly or not at all optimistic about future post skill development. Figure 15 finds individuals are taking actions to address the challenges emerging into job fields.

3. To investigate the willingness and barriers to skill development and investment among professionals.

Above objectives are very optimistic and positive in their approach and outcome but this objective acknowledges the limiting aspects of skill development and abating risk of future job requirements. Figure 14 suggests organizational support and Figure 15 find factors varying from time constraints, monetary constraints, lack of departmental support to even quantum of responsibilities. Figure 17 revealed that 40% of employees are unwilling to invest in their skill development and want the programs fully funded by the organization.

DISCUSSION

Varied age groups (Figure 1), varied occupational activity and varied income levels (Figure 5) helped the study become fully diversified and inclusive with respect to identifying professionals' perspective of job relevancy in a future which is threaten by advancing technologies. The major challenge is rapid advancement and lag in skill development Often when individual learn skill pertaining to the technology the pace of technology updation is such that the individual is on the endeavor of skilling again.

The study find that individual personal interest (Figure 8) and job satisfaction (Figure 7) somewhat gives them drive to have a long sustaining career in their respective fields (Figure 9). To play a long-term game they are interested in upskilling (Figure 17) despite limiting factors like organizational support (Figure 14) and other factors (Figure 16). They abate risk by suggesting multifaceted approaches (Figure 15). Though there are risk factors involved (Figure 13) and there is different demand of future in current job roles (Figure 12),

the respondents are optimistic about future (Figure 18).

When we talked about skill gap when technology rapidly advances, though respondents acknowledge in Figure 12 that future job requirements are high on expectations and require skilling, at the same time Figure 11 shows that 97% of respondents are highly, adequately and even somewhat feel that their current skillset meet the need of emerging future. This reveals about the constant cycle of self-upgradation that is now largely became part of Indian work atmosphere (Though it can be assumed but findings from these 100 respondents suggest the change in Indian work culture with constant self-upgradation by professionals).

Coming on limiting factors which are perceived to be major roadblock in reskilling and upskilling, Figure 14 and Figure 16 provides and alternate viewpoints. In Figure 14 we find that 45% of respondents' organization are highly, 24% adequately, 18% are somewhat supporting their employees in skill development, aggregating the number to be 87%. It is only 9% which is found supporting their employees limitedly and only 4% to be no supporting at all. The next discussion with Figure 16 reveals that though there are limiting factors present and respondents have voted for them but equally we find 18% of respondents who said nil factors and no factors come in their way of skill development.

CONCLUSION

The study reconciles the theoretical 'book-view' with a practical 'field-view'. It addresses prevailing concerns about rapid technological advancements and their impact on job relevance in India. Agreeing on current stream of thought

regarding potential destructions of new rapidly advancing and proliferating technologies and unskilled youth population of India, the study has introduction on the same lines. Initial observations align with global apprehensions about potential disruptions and the challenges of unskilled population, especially youth.

But, after data collection and analysis the study find that professionals though acknowledge the risk aspects with respect to future but are not only ready to upskill and invest in reskilling but are shifting mindsets. Professionals are found in the study of not looking skill as an end but a means to reach the end. The analysis reveals a shift in professional mindsets. While professionals recognize risks such as automation, global competition and diminishing market demands, they increasingly view upskilling as a continuous process and an opportunity, not merely an obligation.

The findings highlight a culture of optimism and adaptability, where professionals actively invest in skill development, seeing it as a means to achieve career resilience and long-term success. Supported by organizational initiatives and technological democratization, this modest shift signals India's readiness to navigate disruptions with confidence.

The study concludes that India and the world will adjust itself to the new wave of disruptions and criticism and a new equilibrium will eventually be restored just like world and India did with COVID-19. This is evident with reports like Navigating Tomorrow by Global Labor Market Conference which reported that over 70% of Indian professionals are actively seeking opportunities to upskill, showcasing India's commitment to technology adaptation and future-proofing.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE SCOPE

The study though tried to be as flawless as it can be but there always a room for improvements. The study is very positive and promising with respect to future with technologies and subsequent skillset adaptations but it represents only one side of the dynamism. The study has only taken professionals (full time, part time and freelancers), who are employed and self-employed. The authors fully acknowledge that it is much easier to upgrade the skill when one has skill and equally easier to adapt when one has job. Finding job and employability crisis is among chief looming threat on India's socio-economic narrative. More studies are needed to see actual and perceived threat and risk which born out of advanced technologies. Secondly, sample size of this study was small to be concrete on industry performance and skilling attitude, future study might be more helpful if use larger sample size. Data collected using Google Forms limit scholars' on-field experience, further study may used other data collection technologies to gain more on-filed experiences that would enrich the study.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Rising awareness
Rising awareness regrading technology adaptation and cyclic nature skill development is an essential requisite for higher growth not only for professionals but also for organization and country as a whole.

Tailor-made strategies
Figure 1 to 5 sourced that varied demographic units require specific intervention to help abate risk of future. There is a requirement to develop targeted skill development programs that can cater to different age groups, all genders, people with different work statuses, experience levels at work and income groups in order to ensure inclusivity in upskilling initiatives.

Regular job relevance analysis
Figure 6, 7, 8 align with job relevancy, career satisfaction, passion driven working. Organisations and Individuals themselves should encourage regular job relevance assessment, job satisfaction levels along with developing career counselling programs to help professionals. This has particularly become relevant in age of Artificial Intelligence because higher level of job satisfaction and employee motivation encourage creativity and innovation., Organisations like IBM are using AI for their Human Resource.

Long-term career vision
Figure 9 revealed that very little percentage of professionals are willing to continue their present role. This recommendation is not against finding right opportunity and increase career curve but for organisations it is a sad news always. Organisations for talent retention must build a systemic environment where professionals feel satisfied and are encouraged to work. Organisations can take inspiration from AT&T's 'Future Ready' initiative where in the organization invested $ 1 billion to retain nearly half of its workforce. For the professionals it is essential to have a long-term career development vision to gather experiential learning and nuanced expertise. One can look at LinkedIn profile of Elliott Hill at Nike.

Mindset and behavioral change
Owing to Figure 10, 11, 12 and 13 it is best in practice to view technology advancements as a cyclic process of constant learning, unlearning

and relearning by the professionals. Employee training programs are essential to equip professionals with necessary skillsets to channelize their strength as per future needs in the field. Professionals should also be equipped with soft skills like emotional intelligence, problem solving, stress management, work life balance, creative assessment etc. this is essential in current times when we see how employees lose their lives under work stress.

Strategic Investment

Figure 14 revealed about organisation's attitude towards skilling investment of professionals. The number is not hundred percent. In today's time when India is competing with developed giants to sustain its large population it is mandatory for organisations to support and invest professionals' skilling need. It must be viewed as a part of Statement of Profit and Loss, an expense to help create asset in balance sheet.

Self-help

Professionals must not view their self-upgradation as an outsourced work which is the duty of the organization that they work in or the government. They, like respondents pointed in Figure 15, should develop career strategies that includes continuous learning, networking, mentorship programs, expert guidance etc. One can always look at Google's 'Grow with Google' initiative for this purpose.

Supportive Infrastructure

Organisations should ensure a supportive work environment and infrastructure to help employees in their skill development. With Figure 16 it is inferred that organization and the employees both must work in conjunction to abate barriers in skill development. It includes implementing flexible learning options like DIT –

Dedicated Innovation Time overcome time constraints. Providing financial support and incentives (Figure 17 suggest that 40% respondents prefer organizational funding for skill development and rest are willing to contribute personally so co-funding models can also be utilized to overcome barrier of monetary constrains. Strong departmental support is also needed.

Helping larger community

Organisations and Professionals must strive for excellence in arenas other than just profits. Helping larger community generate high level of job satisfaction. One can always look at Salesforce 1% pledge and 1-1-1 model.

These forward-looking recommendations are aim to be followed by anyone who wishes to be future-proof in terms of their career. Resource sharing is done by providing real-life example to establish that skilling, upskilling and reskilling are part of 'new normal' in post COVID world.

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RECALIBRATING EVALUATION FOR THE CLIMATE-CONFLICT NEXUS

Tarun Agarwal*

ABSTRACT

As the intersection of climate change and violent conflict increasingly shapes global development and peacebuilding agendas, the need for effective evaluation of interventions in these contexts becomes urgent. This paper critiques the inadequacy of conventional monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks—rooted in linear logics, static indicators, and depoliticized metrics—when applied to climate-conflict interventions in fragile geographies. Drawing on meta-evaluation of projects across the Sahel, South Asia, and the Lake Chad Basin, the paper demonstrates how dominant models such as the OECD-DAC criteria, Logical Framework Approaches, and Theory of Change often fail to capture systemic dynamics, political nuance, and community perspectives. These shortcomings not only obscure the true impact of interventions but can also entrench existing vulnerabilities and exacerbate tensions. In response, the paper proposes a hybrid evaluation framework integrating systems thinking, participatory methods, and complexity-aware tools. This model emphasizes political economy analysis, adaptive indicators, multi-scalar data collection, and embedded feedback loops to assess resilience and conflict outcomes more effectively. By advancing an epistemological shift in how success is defined and measured, the paper calls for institutional reforms in evaluation practice that foreground local agency, contextual complexity, and ethical responsibility.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, the convergence of climate change and violent conflict has emerged as a critical challenge in global policy and development discourse. While the relationship between climate and conflict is neither direct nor deterministic, climate-induced environmental stressors—such as droughts, floods, desertification, and extreme heat—can exacerbate underlying social, economic, and political grievances in fragile contexts, thereby increasing the likelihood of instability and violence (Mach et al., 2019; Ide, 2020). The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in its Sixth Assessment Report (2022) recognized climate change as a "threat multiplier," particularly in regions with low adaptive capacity and protracted conflict. This framing has not only informed diplomatic engagement at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), but also catalyzed programmatic responses across international development agencies, humanitarian actors, and peacebuilding institutions.

In response, a growing portfolio of climate-security interventions has emerged. These range from community-based resilience programs and conflict-sensitive adaptation strategies to regional water-sharing agreements and climate-informed peacebuilding mechanisms (UNDP, 2020; UNEP, 2022). However, despite the proliferation of such interventions, the tools used to evaluate their effectiveness have remained largely static.

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Dominant approaches continue to rely on linear logframe models, rigid output-based indicators, and time-bound performance metrics—frameworks that are often poorly suited to the uncertain, adaptive, and deeply contextual nature of climate-conflict dynamics (Levine, 2022; OECD, 2021). This disjuncture between the complexity of interventions and the simplicity of evaluative tools raises a critical question: how do we know what works, for whom, and under what conditions in fragile, climate-affected geographies?

Existing evaluation systems struggle to capture the multidimensionality of such interventions. In regions where violence disrupts basic service delivery, institutions lack legitimacy, and environmental degradation unfolds in unpredictable ways, standard monitoring and evaluation (M&E) methods often fail to reflect ground realities. For instance, evaluations of climate adaptation programs in the Sahel frequently focus on short-term metrics—such as hectares of land rehabilitated or number of beneficiaries trained—without addressing how these outputs influence community resilience, conflict trajectories, or perceptions of fairness (SIPRI, 2021; UNDP, 2020).

Similarly, post-disaster reconstruction programs in South Asia rarely assess how efforts to build climate resilience might inadvertently entrench existing social hierarchies or fuel new disputes over access to resources (Pelling & Dill, 2010; Wilkinson et al., 2021).

This paper argues that the failure to adapt evaluation frameworks to the unique challenges of climate-conflict interventions results in significant knowledge gaps, policy blind spots, and in some cases, programmatic harm.

It undertakes a meta-evaluation of existing frameworks employed by multilateral agencies and donors in fragile contexts, drawing on three case reflections from the Sahel, South Asia, and the Lake Chad Basin. Through this comparative lens, the paper identifies recurring methodological gaps—including attribution problems, weak feedback loops, and the exclusion of local knowledge—and critiques the inadequacy of dominant models such as the OECD-DAC criteria, Theory of Change (ToC), and Logical Framework Approaches (LFA) in these contexts. Building on these critiques, the paper proposes a hybrid evaluation framework that integrates systems thinking, participatory approaches, and complexity-aware methods. It emphasizes the need for resilience-informed, politically sensitive, and temporally adaptive evaluation models that can more accurately assess the effectiveness of climate-conflict programming in fragile settings.

Ultimately, the aim is not simply to improve measurement tools but to advance a broader epistemological shift in how success is defined, understood, and acted upon in the intersectional domain of climate resilience and conflict mitigation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Evaluation frameworks in Fragile and Climate-Stressed Contexts

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) has evolved from a peripheral administrative task into a central pillar of international development and humanitarian programming. Emerging in the 1960s amid a growing demand for donor accountability, early evaluation models were primarily quantitative, focused on financial disbursements, target compliance, and immediate outputs (Rist & Stame, 2006).

Over the decades, M&E has undergone a significant transformation—particularly with the rise of the results-based management (RBM) paradigm in the 1990s and the global emphasis on impact evaluation in the 2000s—culminating in today's widespread use of sophisticated logical frameworks, performance indicators, and real-time monitoring systems (Bamberger, Rao & Woolcock, 2016; OECD, 2021). This evolution reflects a broader shift toward evidence-based policymaking and the institutionalization of evaluative thinking across donor agencies, multilateral organizations, and development practitioners.

Yet, despite these advancements, the dominant frameworks remain embedded in assumptions increasingly at odds with the realities of fragile and climate-affected regions. These include assumptions of linear causality, where interventions are expected to produce measurable change in a predictable sequence; stable governance structures that ensure implementation fidelity; and environments where baseline conditions can be established and tracked over time. Such assumptions often collapse in fragile, conflict-affected, and climate-stressed contexts, where governance is fragmented, social systems are volatile, and interventions must navigate overlapping crises. Causal pathways are not only nonlinear in such contexts but often recursive and adaptive, with external shocks— such as sudden displacement, political upheaval, or extreme weather events—rapidly altering the trajectory of interventions. As a result, conventional M&E approaches may provide a false sense of clarity while obscuring deeper structural issues or unintended effects (Levine, 2022; Stern et al., 2012).

Moreover, the epistemological foundations of dominant evaluation tools reflect a technocratic and depoliticized view of development. The widespread use of logical frameworks and theory of change models may streamline project planning and donor reporting, but these tools often reduce complex realities to linear chains of inputs, outputs, and outcomes. This simplification has been critiqued for failing to reflect the lived experiences of those affected by interventions and for reinforcing a managerialist logic that privileges measurable over meaningful change (Eyben, 2013). In climate-conflict settings —where interventions often influence and are shaped by resource contestation, social hierarchies, and governance failures—such reductive tools may render invisible critical dynamics, including elite capture, community exclusion, and escalating grievances.

Conventional Models and Their Limits

Among the most influential tools in international development evaluation is the OECD-DAC criteria, which assess relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability (OECD, 2021). These criteria have been instrumental in codifying evaluation standards and providing comparability across diverse projects and sectors. Similarly, the Logical Framework Approach (LFA) and Theory of Change (ToC) are widely used for their clarity in articulating assumptions and expected outcomes. However, these tools presuppose a degree of predictability and control that is rarely present in conflict-affected or environmentally volatile regions. As Bamberger et al. (2016) argue, traditional designs tend to emphasize short-term output indicators—such as the number of training sessions conducted or hectares of land rehabilitated—while neglecting long-term, systemic, or unintended effects.

A fundamental limitation of these models is the attribution problem. In fragile contexts, it is exceedingly difficult to isolate the effects of a single intervention from the multitude of interacting forces—political instability, donor politics, market fluctuations, migration flows—that shape outcomes. This leads to overly narrow or misleading claims about impact, which are often necessary for donor reporting but counterproductive for genuine learning (Stern et al., 2012). Additionally, evaluations based on rigid indicators can lead to perverse incentives, such as encouraging implementing agencies to focus on easily measured activities while avoiding complex but essential components like governance reform or trust-building.

Evaluating in Fragile and Climate-Affected Contexts

Evaluating interventions in fragile contexts requires a paradigm shift away from linear and technocratic models toward more adaptive, reflective, and context-sensitive approaches. Fragile settings are characterized not just by weak institutions or low state capacity but by deeply political environments marked by contested authority, identity-based grievances, and structural exclusion. These characteristics fundamentally challenge the logic of "intervention-as-delivery" that underpins most evaluation models (Valters, Cummings & Nixon, 2016).

The addition of climate stress further complicates the evaluative landscape. Environmental degradation interacts with social, economic, and political vulnerabilities in complex ways. In regions like the Sahel or South Asia, climate-induced phenomena such as floods, droughts, and desertification do not act in isolation but deepen livelihood insecurity, exacerbate migration pressures, and intensify local conflicts.

Evaluations that fail to consider this climate-conflict interface risk producing incomplete or misleading assessments of effectiveness.

Case studies of climate adaptation programs in the Lake Chad Basin illustrate this problem well. Many such programs are evaluated using conventional indicators— agricultural productivity, number of water pumps installed, or training sessions delivered. However, as SIPRI (2021) notes, these indicators tell us little about whether such interventions reduce conflict risks, enhance social cohesion, or build adaptive capacities among the most vulnerable. In some cases, poorly designed programs have exacerbated local tensions by reinforcing elite capture or failing to consult with marginalized groups (UNDP, 2020). Here, the very act of measuring success in narrow terms undermines the broader goals of resilience and peace.

Emerging Frameworks: Realist, Developmental, and Complexity-Aware Approaches

In response to these challenges, alternative frameworks have gained traction. Realist evaluation, introduced by Pawson and Tilley (1997), focuses on uncovering the interaction between context, mechanism, and outcome (CMO), offering a more granular understanding of why certain interventions work in specific settings. Realist approaches are well-suited to fragile environments because they foreground the importance of local context and reject the idea of universal blueprints.

Developmental evaluation, popularized by Michael Quinn Patton (2011), is designed for complex, emergent, and innovative interventions. Rather than evaluating success post-hoc, developmental evaluation embeds evaluative thinking within program implementation, facilitating continuous learning and adaptation.

This is especially relevant for climate-conflict programs that must evolve in response to rapidly changing conditions on the ground.

Complexity-aware monitoring, advocated by USAID (2016), incorporates systems thinking and recognizes that causality in development is often recursive and adaptive. Techniques such as outcome harvesting, sentinel indicators, and network analysis are used to trace indirect, delayed, or emergent outcomes. Complexity-aware frameworks are particularly valuable for capturing the diffuse, multi-scalar effects of climate interventions in fragile zones.

Despite their promise, these innovative approaches face significant barriers to adoption. They often require more time, resources, and capacity than conventional models, and may clash with institutional cultures that prioritize quantifiable, attributable results. Furthermore, while donors express interest in adaptive and context-sensitive evaluations, incentive structures often still favor predictable, time-bound deliverables.

Resilience Measurement and the Politics of Evaluation

The rise of resilience as a guiding concept in climate-conflict programming has introduced new methodological debates. Resilience, by definition, implies the capacity to anticipate, absorb, and adapt to shocks and stresses—features that are inherently dynamic and multi-dimensional (Béné et al., 2018). Yet most evaluation frameworks still struggle to capture resilience as a process rather than a fixed state. Indicators tend to focus on asset accumulation, income diversification, or infrastructure development, often overlooking relational aspects such as trust, governance quality, or social capital (Bahadur et al., 2015).

Moreover, the measurement of resilience is not politically neutral. As several scholars have noted, evaluation is a site of power: what gets measured often reflects institutional mandates, donor priorities, and the politics of visibility (Eyben, 2013). When measurement frameworks reduce complex realities to technocratic indicators, they risk depoliticizing development and marginalizing local voices. In fragile settings, this can lead to the erasure of conflict drivers or the privileging of certain groups over others, thereby undermining the very goals of equitable adaptation and peacebuilding. The literature reveals a deep and growing disconnect between the complexity of climate-conflict interventions and the simplicity of the tools used to evaluate them. While the field of evaluation has made important strides—particularly through the development of realist, developmental, and complexity-aware approaches—mainstream practice remains dominated by models ill-suited to fragile, dynamic, and politically sensitive environments. Addressing this gap requires not only technical innovation but also institutional courage: a willingness to embrace uncertainty, foreground context, and challenge the reductionist tendencies of current evaluative regimes. The next section turns to three illustrative cases to explore how these challenges manifest in practice.

CASE REFLECTIONS: Evaluating Climate-Conflict Interventions in Fragile Contexts

The Sahel: Adaptive Resilience and the Illusion of Coverage

Stretching across West and Central Africa, the Sahel has become emblematic of the climate-conflict nexus. Chronic droughts, land degradation, and water scarcity are layered atop

long-standing governance challenges, weak state presence, and the growing influence of non-state armed groups. In response, international development agencies have launched a host of resilience-building programs framed as climate adaptation with peacebuilding dividends. One of the most prominent initiatives was the UNDP-led Climate Security in the Sahel Programme, co-funded by the European Union and implemented between 2019 and 2022. Its objective was to "strengthen resilience and promote stability by improving climate-sensitive livelihoods, natural resource management, and conflict mitigation capacities." The program adopted a multi-country, multi-sectoral design and included agroforestry initiatives, sustainable land management, youth engagement in green enterprises, and the creation of community conflict resolution platforms.

While ambitious in its scope, the program's evaluation framework largely adhered to traditional DAC criteria and output-based metrics. The final evaluation report emphasized indicators such as the number of reforested hectares, participants trained in sustainable agricultural practices, and the formation of local peace committees (UNDP, 2022). These indicators enabled easy reporting but did not assess the quality or legitimacy of the peace mechanisms, nor did they capture changes in local power relations or environmental grievances. For instance, local NGOs in Mali and Niger raised concerns that reforestation efforts had unintentionally reignited disputes between pastoralists and sedentary farmers over land boundaries and grazing routes (Benjaminsen et al., 2021). These concerns were not acknowledged in the final evaluation, which treated biophysical outputs as proxies for improved resilience.

Moreover, the evaluation was conducted within six months of project closure, offering little opportunity to assess the durability of outcomes in volatile political environments.

Furthermore, the project did not integrate climate-sensitive conflict mapping into its baseline assessments. A meta-review of Sahelian environmental peacebuilding projects by SIPRI (2021) highlights that programs in the region often suffer from "strategic amnesia"—failing to account for prior interventions, unresolved community grievances, or the influence of external actors like armed militias. In the case of the UNDP project, peace committees were established without ensuring inclusive participation, particularly of women and transhumant pastoralist groups, thereby limiting their legitimacy. The result was a program that appeared successful on paper—exceeding targets in technical and institutional outputs—but whose impact on actual conflict dynamics and adaptive capacity remained opaque.

The Sahel case illustrates how even well-funded and politically supported programs can become detached from the granular realities of fragility when evaluations prioritize quantification over understanding.

South Asia: Flood Resilience and the Engineering Paradigm in Bangladesh

Bangladesh presents a compelling case for examining the shortcomings of evaluation frameworks in climate-conflict settings. As one of the world's most climate-vulnerable countries, it experiences recurrent flooding, cyclonic storms, and salinity intrusion. These environmental stressors intersect with deep socioeconomic inequalities, contested land rights, and ethnic marginalization, particularly in the coastal and riverine districts.

In 2014, the Government of Bangladesh, supported by the World Bank and the Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery (GFDRR), initiated the Climate Resilient Infrastructure Improvement Project (CRIIP). Designed to improve rural roads, embankments, and public shelters in flood-prone areas, the project had the dual aim of reducing disaster risk and enhancing local mobility.

The evaluation framework adopted by CRIIP was highly technocratic, emphasizing completion rates of infrastructure, cost-efficiency, and short-term user satisfaction. As documented in the World Bank's Implementation Completion Report (2018), the success of the project was largely defined through indicators such as kilometers of raised roads, percentage of roads passable during floods, and number of people accessing shelters. While these metrics reflected tangible achievements, they obscured deeper contestations around land, displacement, and local power. Critical studies by Bangladeshi researchers (Ahmed & Hasan, 2020) found that road and embankment construction in areas like Barisal and Satkhira reshaped local water flow and sediment patterns, disproportionately benefiting politically connected landowners while marginalizing smallholders and landless laborers. In some instances, raised embankments cut off traditional drainage channels, causing waterlogging in adjoining villages and triggering disputes between beneficiary and non-beneficiary communities. Importantly, the CRIIP evaluation did not systematically account for these social dynamics, nor did it include disaggregated impact analysis by class, gender, or ethnicity. Consultations were often conducted with formal community leaders or elite representatives, thereby missing voices from vulnerable groups such as indigenous populations or char dwellers.

The assumption underlying the evaluation model —that infrastructure inherently produces equitable resilience—failed to consider how infrastructure is both shaped by and shapes socio-political power. As Pelling and Dill (2010) have argued, disaster risk reduction projects, when designed without attention to local governance structures, may reinforce existing vulnerabilities or even generate new risks.

In CRIIP's case, the engineering-centric approach to evaluation provided a streamlined narrative of success, while sidelining the emergent tensions that affected long-term adaptation outcomes. This reflects a broader problem in evaluation design: when resilience is reduced to physical robustness, it masks the political contestations embedded in environmental adaptation.

Lake Chad Basin: Technocratic Sophistication Without Political Insight

The Lake Chad Basin, encompassing parts of Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria, offers a third perspective on the misalignment between evaluation frameworks and ground realities in climate-conflict zones. The region is characterized by ecological degradation, rapid demographic growth, violent extremism (notably from Boko Haram), and mass displacement. In response to the multifaceted crisis, the World Food Programme (WFP) and Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) jointly implemented a multi-country Livelihoods and Resilience Programme between 2016 and 2021. The initiative sought to improve food security and climate resilience through asset creation (such as irrigation systems and community grain banks), income diversification, and climate-smart agriculture, with specific targeting of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and returnees.

The evaluation, conducted in partnership with a third-party firm and the WFP's Office of Evaluation, was methodologically ambitious. It used a combination of quasi-experimental surveys, geospatial analysis, and cost-efficiency assessments. It also deployed standard resilience metrics such as the Food Consumption Score (FCS), Coping Strategy Index (CSI), and household income stability (WFP, 2021). While this approach marked a step forward from output-centric evaluations, its limitations became evident when assessed through a fragility and political economy lens. First, the evaluation failed to differentiate between outcomes for host communities and displaced populations—a crucial omission in a region where competition over resources, aid targeting, and ethnic boundaries can exacerbate tensions. Reports from the International Crisis Group (ICG, 2020) noted that in certain locations, aid inflows led to perceptions of favoritism and triggered backlash from communities that felt excluded, sometimes resulting in threats to aid workers and community leaders.

Second, while the evaluation included a cost-benefit analysis of different interventions, it largely neglected the institutional dynamics governing access to those benefits. Local researchers and humanitarian monitors observed that certain resilience assets—particularly wells and food stores—were captured by informal authorities or manipulated by gatekeepers aligned with armed actors (Muggah & McDermott, 2021). These dynamics were rarely acknowledged in the evaluation, which focused instead on efficiency gains and aggregate livelihood outcomes.

Furthermore, while the use of sophisticated indicators provided a veneer of objectivity, the household-level focus missed broader questions of governance legitimacy, conflict transformation, and trust-building— all of which are crucial for sustainable adaptation in volatile environments.

The Lake Chad case exemplifies how evaluations that are technically sound but politically shallow may produce misleading narratives of success. As Levine (2022) argues, evaluation in fragile contexts must go beyond measuring whether people are "better off" economically and assess whether interventions contribute to systemic resilience and conflict mitigation. In the absence of such inquiry, even the most data-rich evaluations risk missing the forest for the trees.

FRAMEWORK CRITIQUE AND METHODOLOGICAL GAPS

The three case reflections presented earlier— spanning the Sahel, South Asia, and the Lake Chad Basin—underscore the growing mismatch between conventional evaluation approaches and the operational complexity of climate-conflict interventions in fragile contexts. While each project had its own geographical and thematic distinctiveness, their evaluations converged on a common set of shortcomings: an overreliance on linear, technocratic frameworks; disregard for underlying political dynamics; temporal compression that prioritized short-term metrics; and limited incorporation of local knowledge and lived realities. This section expands upon these limitations, synthesizing lessons from both the literature and the field to expose the methodological, conceptual, and normative gaps that pervade the current evaluation landscape.

The Tyranny of Indicators: Technocratic Metrics in Complex Systems
A prominent concern within the evaluation of

climate-conflict interventions is the dominance of pre-established indicators derived from results-based management (RBM) frameworks. While designed to standardize and simplify evaluation, these frameworks tend to reduce complex, context-specific realities to a narrow set of quantifiable measures. The OECD-DAC evaluation criteria — relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability—though globally accepted, operate within a paradigm of linear causality that assumes stable environments and clearly traceable input-output pathways (OECD, 2021). In fragile and climate-affected settings, such assumptions falter. As the Sahel case illustrates, interventions are often assessed based on surface-level outputs—such as the number of hectares reforested or the quantity of climate adaptation trainings delivered—while failing to measure the deeper transformations required for long-term resilience and peacebuilding. These indicators may offer convenience and clarity for donors, but they rarely capture contested land rights, shifts in intercommunal relations, or subtle changes in governance legitimacy. In this sense, the tools designed to measure success may inadvertently reinforce an illusion of control over development outcomes in systems marked by unpredictability and volatility (Bamberger, Rao, & Woolcock, 2016).

Moreover, even sophisticated metrics such as the Food Consumption Score (FCS) or Coping Strategy Index (CSI), which were used in the Lake Chad Basin case, remain rooted in econometric and household-level logics that abstract away from relational and institutional dynamics. As Chambers (1997) warned, such reliance on pre-coded indicators promotes a form of "professional blindness," privileging what is easily measured while ignoring what is locally significant or morally urgent.

This technocratic narrowing not only limits learning but also biases programming towards what is auditable, often at the expense of systemic change.

The Missing Politics: Evaluation as Apolitical Practice

Perhaps more fundamental than methodological shortcomings is the epistemological issue of depoliticization. Mainstream evaluation frameworks often treat development interventions as politically neutral exercises in problem-solving. However, climate-conflict programs are inherently political: they redistribute resources, shift power relations, and redefine access to ecological and institutional assets. Ignoring these dynamics reduces evaluation to a managerial function, severed from the social contexts in which interventions unfold.

Ferguson's (1994) notion of the "anti-politics machine" is instructive here. Development projects, according to Ferguson, often recast political struggles as technical challenges, enabling the continuation of inequitable systems under the guise of neutral policy. Evaluations that adopt this logic fail to question who benefits, who is excluded, and how power is restructured as a result of programming. This critique was clearly visible in the Sahel and Bangladesh cases, where project evaluations omitted inquiry into how interventions altered existing tensions over land, identity, and governance authority. In the Lake Chad Basin, the appropriation of community assets by local elites and informal power brokers—well-documented in field studies—was absent from official evaluation reports (International Crisis Group, 2020; Muggah & McDermott, 2021). Further exacerbating this problem is the widespread use of external evaluators, who often operate within time and

funding constraints that limit deep engagement with political economy dynamics. As Eyben (2013) argues, many evaluations serve the performative purpose of validating aid rather than interrogating its assumptions. This renders evaluation not just ineffective, but complicit in sustaining aid architectures that reward compliance over learning and technocratic stability over social transformation.

Short-Termism and Temporal Blindness

Another critical limitation is the tendency to evaluate interventions within short timeframes, typically aligned with donor funding cycles. This temporal compression undermines the ability of evaluations to assess the durability, adaptability, and long-term effects of programming—particularly in fragile and climate-affected settings where feedback loops are slow, unpredictable, and non-linear.

In the Bangladesh case, the embankments constructed under the CRIIP project were hailed as successful in reducing immediate flood damage. However, several years later, new studies revealed that the altered water flow and sedimentation patterns had led to localized waterlogging and displacement, triggering new forms of vulnerability and grievance (Ahmed & Hasan, 2020). These dynamics were invisible to the short-term evaluation framework used by the project. Similar issues were observed in the Sahel and Lake Chad cases, where peacebuilding and livelihood programs were evaluated within months of closure, offering no insight into whether institutions endured, whether resource competition was reduced, or whether community trust was restored.

Development theorists have long emphasized the importance of recognizing the temporal nature of change in complex systems. Pritchett, Woolcock, and Andrews (2013) argue that institutional

transformation is often non-linear and path-dependent, requiring not just intervention but iteration. Evaluation models that assume linear timelines and rapid feedback fail to align with these realities, producing assessments that are both premature and incomplete. What is needed is a shift toward phased evaluation models, allowing for ex-post analysis, periodic learning loops, and the tracking of lagging indicators that only emerge under stress or after a delay.

Marginalizing the Margins: Whose Knowledge Counts?

Finally, and perhaps most profoundly, evaluation frameworks in climate-conflict settings often exclude or undervalue the knowledge and perspectives of those most affected by interventions. This exclusion is not merely a failure of inclusion but a reflection of epistemological hierarchy—where expert, formal, and external knowledge is prioritized over local, experiential, and informal knowledge.

While many evaluations claim to be participatory, in practice this often means limited consultations with community representatives or elite informants, rather than co-design of indicators, shared interpretation of results, or deliberative spaces for feedback (Cornwall, 2007). As Leach, Scoones, and Stirling (2010) emphasize in their work on dynamic sustainabilities, resilience is not a technical attribute but a lived process, shaped by history, culture, and negotiation. Evaluations that fail to engage with local definitions of resilience, conflict resolution, and success are bound to produce assessments that are misaligned with ground realities.

The case studies confirm this pattern. In the Sahel, pastoralist groups and women's cooperatives—two key constituencies in climate-vulnerable communities—were largely absent

from peace committee evaluations. In Bangladesh, landless communities who bore the brunt of waterlogging were not part of the evaluation process. In Lake Chad, IDPs and returnees were bundled into generic beneficiary categories, erasing critical distinctions in access, entitlement, and vulnerability. This marginalization of the margins not only undermines the credibility of evaluations but also their utility. Interventions cannot be meaningfully assessed without understanding how they are experienced, adapted, and contested by different social actors.

Furthermore, such exclusions perpetuate a broader epistemic injustice—the privileging of Northern, technocratic knowledge systems over Southern, situated knowledge. Scholars such as Escobar (1995) and Chambers (1997) have long critiqued the colonial underpinnings of development knowledge production. Without confronting these asymmetries, even the most methodologically advanced evaluations may replicate the very exclusions that climate-conflict interventions purport to address.

The critique presented in this section reveals that the inadequacy of evaluation frameworks in fragile, climate-conflict contexts is not merely technical but structural. Evaluation as currently practiced often rewards measurability over meaning, depoliticized inherently political processes, compresses time in ways that obscure actual change, and marginalizes those with the deepest stake in outcomes. Addressing these gaps requires more than tweaking indicators or expanding toolkits; it demands a rethinking of the purposes, politics, and epistemologies of evaluation itself. As climate-conflict risks intensify and development actors increasingly operate in fragile environments, the imperative to reimagine evaluation becomes not just

methodological, but moral. In the next section, we propose a hybrid evaluation framework that seeks to respond to these challenges by integrating systems thinking, participatory design, and conflict-sensitive methodologies.

TOWARD A HYBRID EVALUATION FRAMEWORK FOR CLIMATE-CONFLICT ZONES

In response to the substantial shortcomings outlined in the previous section, this part of the paper proposes a hybrid evaluation framework that better captures the complexity, fluidity, and contested nature of climate-conflict interventions in fragile contexts. Rather than discarding conventional tools altogether, the proposed approach seeks to recalibrate them by combining the accountability and structure of traditional models with the adaptability, contextual sensitivity, and inclusivity demanded by volatile environments. This hybrid model draws from a synthesis of realist evaluation, developmental evaluation, complexity-aware monitoring, and participatory action research, while embedding principles of conflict sensitivity, resilience thinking, and political economy analysis as foundational rather than optional elements.

Foundational Principles: Complexity, Uncertainty, and Locality

At the heart of this hybrid framework lies an epistemological shift: moving away from the illusion of linear causality and predictable outcomes toward an understanding of interventions as adaptive engagements with complex systems. Fragile and climate-affected regions are characterized by polycentric governance, overlapping institutions, informal rule-making, and socially embedded resource disputes.

In such settings, change is emergent, contingent, and often nonlinear. As outlined by Ramalingam et al. (2008), complexity-aware approaches to evaluation emphasize feedback loops, dynamic baselines, and the importance of timing, sequencing, and relational dynamics. These principles challenge the notion of fixed indicators and encourage evaluators to think in terms of process tracing, pattern detection, and iteration.

This also necessitates integrating systems thinking—not merely as a visual tool (such as problem trees or causal loop diagrams), but as a methodological orientation that understands interventions as part of broader ecological, social, and political feedback systems. In practice, this means recognizing that a climate-resilient irrigation scheme may affect not only agricultural yield but also land tenure systems, migration patterns, gender roles, and informal governance. As Meadows (2008) famously argued, changing a single variable in a complex system can lead to counterintuitive or delayed effects elsewhere. An evaluation framework that fails to account for these interlinkages risks attributing change to the wrong factors—or missing it altogether.

Equally essential is the grounding of this hybrid framework in local epistemologies and lived experience. While the literature on participatory methods is vast (Chambers, 1997; Cornwall, 2007), many evaluations continue to treat local knowledge as anecdotal or supplementary. This framework reverses that hierarchy by treating local actors not only as data sources but as co-analysts and co-interpreters of evaluation findings. It advocates the use of "citizen-generated data" and community-led scorecards alongside expert analysis. Moreover, it encourages evaluators to invest time in building trust, engaging local knowledge holders, and recognizing plural understandings of resilience,

justice and success. The work of Leach et al. (2010) has shown that "resilience" can mean vastly different things in different settings—from securing ancestral grazing routes to ensuring access to women's cooperatives or safeguarding spiritual landscapes. A hybrid framework must be flexible enough to accommodate these diverse visions.

Structural Components of the Hybrid Framework

The operationalization of the hybrid model involves five key components:

(1) stakeholder mapping and political economy scoping,
(2) mixed-methods and multi-scalar data collection,
(3) adaptive and iterative indicators,
(4) embedded feedback loops, and
(5) integrative sense-making.

First, stakeholder mapping and political economy scoping must occur before any evaluation instrument is designed. This step ensures that evaluators understand who holds power, who is excluded, and how climate and conflict risks are distributed. Tools such as CARE's "Rapid Political Economy Analysis" (2021) or DFID's "Drivers of Change" framework are well-suited to this task. This phase must also include conflict-sensitivity analysis, informed by tools like the Do No Harm framework (Anderson, 1999), to identify how interventions interact with identity, resource access, and perceptions of fairness.

Second, the framework insists on mixed-methods and multi-scalar data collection. Quantitative indicators—such as yield improvements, household income changes, or rainfall variability—are important, but they must be complemented with ethnographic observations, in - depth

interviews and participatory tools such as mapping, timelines, and storytelling. Multi-scalarity refers to the need to collect data not only at the household or community level but also at meso and macro-levels: district governance, inter-group relations, national policy environments. This allows the evaluation to trace how change moves across layers and how local dynamics are shaped by regional or global forces.

Third, the hybrid model introduces adaptive and iterative indicators, rejecting the rigidity of static logframes. This does not mean discarding measurement, but rather treating indicators as provisional hypotheses to be revisited in response to new information. For example, an initial indicator for social cohesion—such as frequency of inter-group meetings—might be expanded or replaced mid-evaluation if communities prioritize other markers of trust. Drawing from developmental evaluation (Patton, 2011), the evaluator's role becomes one of facilitation and sense-making, enabling ongoing adaptation of tools and metrics.

Fourth, embedded feedback loops are critical to ensuring that evaluation is not only extractive but generative. Data collected must be shared with communities and stakeholders through periodic learning dialogues, enabling course correction and reinforcing accountability.

Feedback mechanisms—such as mobile-based surveys, community noticeboards, or reflective workshops—also serve to mitigate evaluation fatigue and reinforce the idea that learning is reciprocal. In fragile settings, where relationships and perceptions are often more volatile than infrastructure, these feedback loops can be as important as formal indicators.

Finally, integrative sense-making involves synthesizing data across methods, scales, and time horizons. This is where the hybrid framework distinguishes itself from conventional mixed-methods evaluations. Rather than parallel tracks of quantitative and qualitative analysis, this approach requires evaluators to build narratives of change that weave together trends, contradictions, and ambiguities. These narratives should be co-constructed with diverse stakeholders, subjected to scrutiny, and made available not just to funders but to local communities. The process of making sense together is itself an act of resilience-building—supporting deliberation, trust, and adaptive governance.

Piloting and Institutional Implications

Piloting this framework will require both institutional flexibility and evaluator capacity. It is not intended as a turnkey solution but as a set of principles and practices adaptable to different contexts. The framework has already found partial expression in some programming: the Mercy Corps' RISE II resilience program in Niger and Burkina Faso, for instance, used outcome harvesting, participatory mapping, and conflict analysis in its evaluation design (Mercy Corps, 2022). Similarly, USAID's complexity-aware monitoring pilots have tested tools like Sentinel Indicators and Most Significant Change in fragile settings. However, these examples remain exceptions rather than the norm.

The broader challenge is institutional. Most donors continue to commission evaluations with fixed indicators, tight deadlines, and narrow accountability metrics. To enable hybrid frameworks, they must invest in longer evaluation horizons, flexible funding & capacity

development for evaluators with interdisciplinary training. Academic partnerships may be critical here, particularly with local universities and think tanks that can anchor longitudinal engagement. Evaluation units within organizations such as UNDP, FAO, and WFP also need to rethink the Terms of Reference they issue—incorporating clauses on political economy analysis, participatory methods, and iterative design from the outset. Moreover, this framework calls for a shift in evaluator mindset: from auditors of delivery to facilitators of reflection. As Bamberger and Mabry (2019) note, transformative evaluation requires humility, political awareness, and ethical sensitivity. In climate-conflict settings, evaluators are not neutral observers—they are participants in shaping knowledge, influencing resource flows, and affecting legitimacy. This hybrid model embraces that reality and offers a pathway toward evaluations that are not only rigorous, but responsible.

CONCLUSION: Reimagining Evaluation for a Fragmented and Warming World

As climate disruptions intensify and fragility deepens across multiple geographies, the intersection of environmental stress and conflict has become a defining challenge for development and peacebuilding agendas. While institutions have responded with an array of climate-resilience and conflict-mitigation programs, the mechanisms for evaluating these interventions have not kept pace with the complexity of the problems they aim to address. This paper has argued that the dominant evaluation paradigms —anchored in technocratic indicators, linear theories of change, and static logframes—are structurally misaligned with the dynamic, multi-layered realities of climate-conflict contexts.

Through empirical case reflections from the Sahel, South Asia, and the Lake Chad Basin, we observed how evaluations routinely fail to capture political nuance, temporal depth, and local perspectives, often resulting in assessments that affirm bureaucratic performance rather than reveal substantive insight.

In response, we have proposed a hybrid evaluation framework grounded in systems thinking, political economy analysis, and participatory engagement. This approach does not reject traditional tools outright but repurposes them within a broader epistemological shift that treats resilience as emergent, context-contingent, and socially negotiated. By incorporating mixed methods, adaptive indicators, feedback loops, and community-centered sense-making, the hybrid model aims to reconcile the imperatives of rigor, relevance, and responsibility.

Yet for such a framework to take root, institutional change is imperative. Donor agencies must embrace longer evaluation horizons, fund reflective spaces, and cultivate evaluator capacities attuned to uncertainty, power, and voice. Ultimately, reimagining evaluation is not just a methodological exercise— it is a political and ethical act. It asks us to reconsider what we value, who we listen to, and how we know what we claim to know in the fragmented and warming world we seek to repair.

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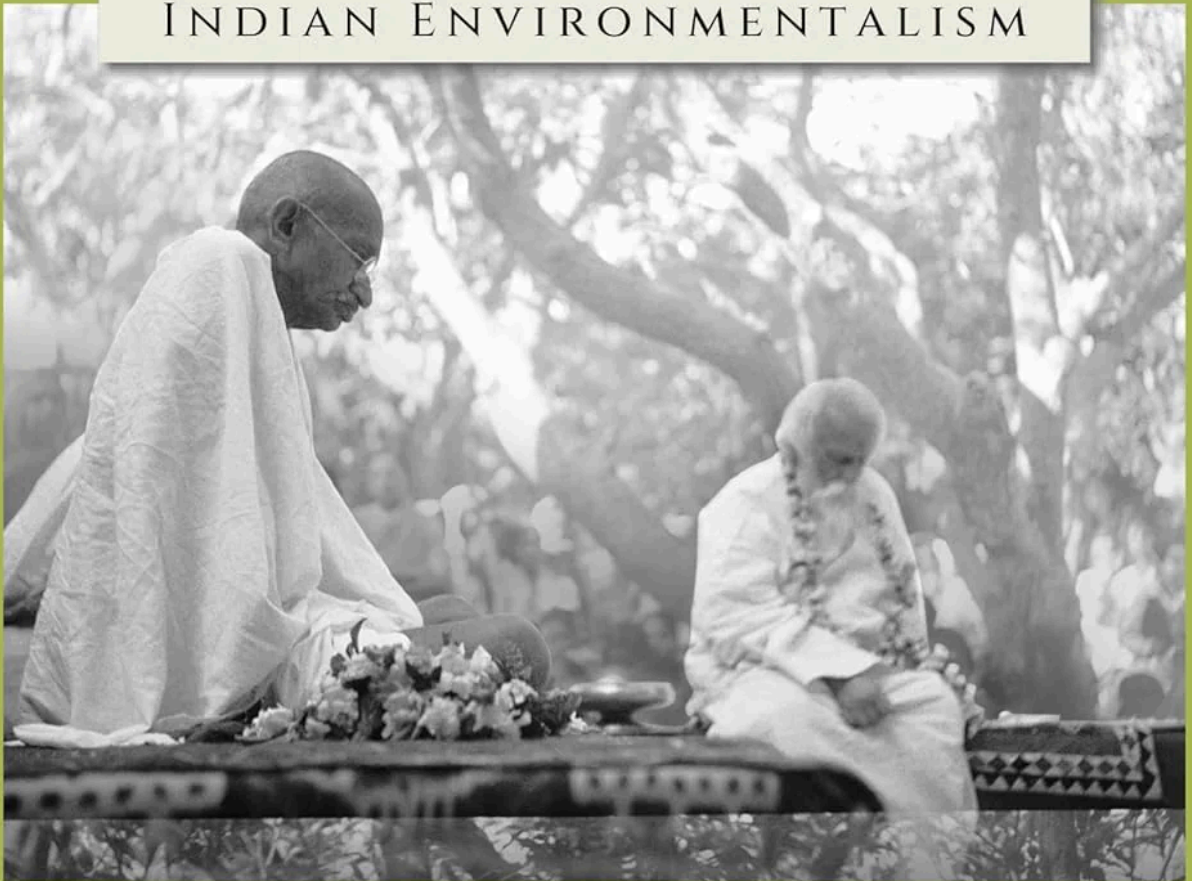
BOOK REVIEWS

SPEAKING
with
NATURE

THE ORIGINS OF
INDIAN ENVIRONMENTALISM

RAMACHANDRA GUHA

SPEAKING WITH NATURE: THE ORIGINS OF INDIAN ENVIRONMENTALISM
Ramchandra Guha

Amisha Budhraja*

With COP29 concluding in Baku and the focus shifting towards Indigenous participation in climate dialogues, it is time for the environmental discourse to turn its head towards the global south.

In his latest book, 'Speaking with Nature', the renowned Indian historian Ramchandra Guha tries to build an Indian environmental discourse by encapsulating the ideas of 10 people he considers as early ecologists. He combines his patriotism, presentism, and partisanship with nature to move beyond his previous discussions of Chipko Andolan, and other tribal movements. He profiles people from different disciplinary and intellectual backgrounds, including Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, Sociologist Radhakamal Mukherjee, economist JC Kumarappa, Gandhi's adopted daughter Mira Behen, anthropologist Verrier Elwin, and more.

Challenging the notion that only developed countries can turn toward conservation, Guha tries to reason that the major ideas of deep ecology now famous in the West, were already present in the writings of these men and women who are otherwise known for their social and political scholarship in India. The author highlights the legacies of these scholars who refuted simple-minded dichotomies- modernity versus tradition, science versus activism, East versus the West, nature versus humanity.

The Myriad-Minded Man, Rabindranath Tagore, poetically describes the trees of India in his literary works. His fascination with nature makes the author compare him to the famous

naturalist John Mair. The chapter includes many excerpts from his travels to Bali including his letters to his niece, replete with sayings like 'the rain patters, the leaf quivers.' There is a sense of devotion, 'sadhana' towards nature which has also been spoken about in the chapter on KM Munshi, a Hindu nationalist, who served as the Minister of Food and Agriculture (which also included the subject of environment) in a post-independent India. His emphasis on Vana Mahotsava was correlated to spiritual beliefs as in the case of sacred groves. He was the first thinker in India to bring an explicitly religious dimension to the protection of nature.

Other scholars like Radhakamal Mukherjee critique Western industry for being consumerist in nature, an idea that is widely prevalent in contemporary times. He advocates for a communitarian approach taking cues from indigenous systems of common property that were present in pre-colonial times. His accounts of the city of Gwalior recalling the experiences of ravine reclamation is a case that is still relevant.

A similar approach was also taken by Mahatma Gandhi who said, 'India lives in her villages' which is also reflected in the chapter based on his economist, J.C Kumarappa. Ideas such as handmade production in the form of khadi, nurturing village industries, and the focus on an agrarian society instead of industrialization as was the norm for development, are some revolutionary ideas presented by him.

Inspired by such ideas, Scottish town planner,

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Patrick Geddes explored city development teamed with parks, gardens, etc intending to make gentle improvements with minimal disruption of people and their habitat. His focus areas constituted water conservation, recycling, and making the utmost use of small spaces- such as minimizing the city's dependence on the hinterland. His plan for the city of Indore and its flourishing cotton industry was sustainable. He also demarcated spaces for the recreation and rejuvenation of women and children like the Zenana park of Indore.

While on one hand, Geddes directed his focus on sustainable urban planning, the husband-wife duo, Albert and Gabrielle Howard were on a quest to agriculture ecological. Albert, a member of the Imperial Agricultural Research Institute in Pusa, experimented on a variety of crops, especially wheat, and over-irrigation in its process of production causing degradation of land in the Punjab region. His wife helped him publish papers on the subject which is a cause of concern even in contemporary times. Guha critiques their writings for ignoring the caste factor in Indian agriculture. The couple widely supported the use of composting in agriculture as was done in Indore and replicated in other countries.

My favourite chapter was the one on Mira Behen, Gandhiji's adopted daughter, whose descriptions of the trees of Kumaon Himalaya are as enchanting as Wordsworth's poetry. Her writings emphasize the fact that a person is truly free when she is in harmony with nature. Her concern for the Oak trees being replaced by Pine in the Himalayan region, and road construction in the Himalayas shows her far-sightedness and love for nature. She also laments the disappearance of Haldu Trees and its yellow flowers which were planted near temples. Her focus on villages & the renewal of their economy

as in the case of Bhotiyas and their weaving traditions is a good case study. Her inquisitiveness and a will for sustainable development are apparent in her anecdotes.

Another interesting perspective is envisioned in the writings of anthropologist, Verrier Elwin, who profiled the Gond and Baiga tribes of the Central Provinces who he believed 'were at home with nature, and nature was at home with them'. His immersion in the tribal culture was signified by his marriage to a Gond woman. He also served as the anthropological advisor of the NEFA region in post-independent India. The last thinker that the author covers is M Krishnan who brings in perspectives about the conservation of endemic species like the black buck, and lion-tailed macaque in Western Ghats. The author also highlights the degrading rank of India in the Environmental Performance Index from 155 out of 178 countries in 2014 to the very bottom, 180 out of 180 in 2022. His references to domestic ecological disasters like the air pollution crises in Delhi underscore his motive for such a publication.

Each chapter starts with a brief background of a scholar and how the scholar got intrigued with ecology. The chapters are full of personal anecdotes, letters, historical insights, essays, and couplets from the various authors substantiating the main arguments. Guha not only writes about their ideas linking them to environmentalism, but he also looks at them critically and identifies the missing linkages in their writings. His book even though based on Indian environmental history, does not negate the various developments happening worldwide. He tries to enrich the literature already present by including perspectives from India.

While the 'full stomach environmentalism' comes

from a position of elitism, Indian environmentalism is driven by the instinct of survival. It is intricately woven into the lives of the people of the global south. The book skilfully weaves together history, ecology, sociology, and personal storytelling making the discourse on ecology interdisciplinary.

However, the book focuses extensively on Indian ecological contexts, which makes it less relatable for readers unfamiliar with the region. Moreover, despite its emphasis on diversity, the book excludes Indian women's perspectives, with only two European women featured. Guha acknowledges this gap in the introduction, attributing it to the patriarchal barriers of the era that limited women's participation in public debates. Certain chapters of the book become information-heavy, making casual readers feel overwhelmed. Despite being dense with data, it falls short of providing specific, actionable steps for individuals and policymakers.

The major themes of the book centre around villages and their sustainable lifestyles, deforestation with the coming up of the British empire, and industrialization, others talk about the personal experiences of thinkers that paved their way towards environmentalism. The author's style of writing appeases both- literary scholars, as well as academics as the flow is poetic and laden with well-researched arguments. It is like a bird singing melodiously, those paying attention will be delighted while those who ignore it, might miss out on something worthwhile.

This book is the result of his scholarly rigor combined with his enthralling interest in nature. It is an attempt to draw from the glorious compost of ideas that India holds and initiate a dialogue that inspires people to acknowledge if not implement innovative ways of conservation.

The Anxious Generation

How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness

Jonathan Haidt

Coauthor of *The Coddling of the American Mind*

THE ANXIOUS GENERATION: HOW THE GREAT REWIRING OF CHILDHOOD IS CAUSING AN EPIDEMIC OF MENTAL ILLNESS
Jonathan Haidt

Shaivie Sharma*

"The Anxious Generation How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness" written by Jonathan Haidt, an American Social Psychologist was published in early 2024 and has since been well received amongst a varied reading base consisting of academics, psychologists, educators and the general public. Its plot focuses on two parallel transitions that ushered a rewiring of the experience of childhood as Gen Z children grew. These two transitions are i) the move from a play-based childhood to a phone-based childhood and, ii) a possibly well intentioned but detrimental shift towards over-protecting children in the "real world" i.e the world outside our devices where interactions are embodied, synchronous, one-to-one or one-to-several and in communities marked by investments in relationship building. These together created a generation of anxious teenagers.

The book's launch coincides with a critical period of rethinking. As nations begin a critical analysis of technology and social media, techno-optimism has found a balance in the evaluation of the use of social media in its capacity to serve and not enslave people. The book is then an important text for our world in constant evolution with implications for the future of our children and having insights for individuals dealing with children in all aspects of life. This review attempts a visualization of the book accounting for its contribution as a repertoire of insights on childhood as a category of analysis.

The book opens with a hypothetical thought experiment that sets the stage for the book's discussion of a rewiring of childhood at the turn of the decade in 2010. It urges the reader to imagine having to send their 10 year old child to the first permanent human settlement on Mars. While the reader begins a disdainful deliberation of the same, Haidt explains how in some ways we indeed have sent our children to live on Mars, Mars being a metaphor for the world of the smartphone and social media, an unfathomable world that births inhibitions and alters childhood just as stepping on Mars would.

One of the book's major strengths is that it follows a comprehensive writing style and journeys through genre-blended writing. It begins with a data driven approach to present a case of the aggravating mental health concerns amongst children and their association with the rewiring of childhood and then transitions to an appeal for action laying down suggestions for adults to navigate the childhood of children. It's not a book written only in the spirit of persuasion; rather it informs the readers through an evaluation of data from many sources including large scale studies and surveys.

It follows an evolutionary sociology perspective to highlight the primacy of experiential development during childhood marked by critical periods of growth. For human children to transition to adulthood, a play-based childhood marked by constant interaction and attunement with others is a necessity. Children deprived of the same and turned towards a phone-based childhood miss out on the development of social skills required to assess risks, make judgements adapt to the requirements of the environments &

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dangers they are subjected to. Since humans are known for their remarkable social nature, our childhood is marked by a slower period of transition so that the brain functions can evolve through constant experience seeking and learning as a consequence of the same.

The author blends in these insights from evolutionary sociology with data from contemporary research on the consequences of the use of social media amongst children. Social media has provided an easy route to socialization of young people. Within a few clicks, they can run through many data points to ascertain what works and what doesn't. Resultantly, the pressure of a continuous performance on social media has led to lower self-esteem and constant comparisons where children are likely to experience greater mental fatigue. Haidt's findings highlight the elevation in the rates of mental health issues such as anxiety, depression and eating and body image disorders highlighting statistics on self-reporting as well as the instances of medical emergencies resulting from self harm. While in terms of absolute numbers these mental health impacts appear more drastic for teenage girls, relative statistics show that the influence on teenage boys' mental health has also aggravated drastically though the areas and manifestations of this impact may differ in their cases.

While the book advocates safeguarding children from the push and pull of social media algorithms designed to pull not only children but all of us into a whirlpool of addictive data points, its overall take allows a refreshing reimagination of childhood. The book accords an agency to children that has been long lost in discussions of childhood. It distinguishes between fragile and resilient objects to assert that children can be defined as anti-fragile.

This means that while safeguarding children is a responsibility adults assume and rightly so, it's time for us to turn back to times when children were set free in the world of play. This does not mean that the author suggests a revocation of children's safety; rather, it advocates for a preliminary development of children's adjustment mechanisms in the real world which shall help them settle into and navigate the world of social media. While this cannot be negated, the writing style of the book subsumes a general reservation towards social media marked by suspicion instead of an optimistic outlook towards the same. This suspected defensive outlook towards social media mystifies its other side, the extension of an agency to its users.

The book uses the term "safetyism" to refer to a culture or belief system that accords such sanctity to safety that people are unwilling to make a trade off for other advancing concerns. The concept of safety has crept beyond what were considered its initial dimensions. Today, in our quest for preserving what is called emotional safety of children, we as adults are determined to kill all triggers, some of which are required for children to face and address on their own. Trigger warning is a buzzword in our world today but certain triggering stimuli around us actually prepare children to adjust and grow, being temporary bruises that have much to teach rather than lingering scars.

The book guides us to see that the anxiety of the anxious generation it describes can be done away with. It leaves readers with a compelling narrative to rethink how we prepare children to take up space in the real and digital worlds & is therefore an important text for those committed to taking intellectual, theoretical and practical steps towards shaping a healthier, happier generation.

THE BOOK OF INDIAN
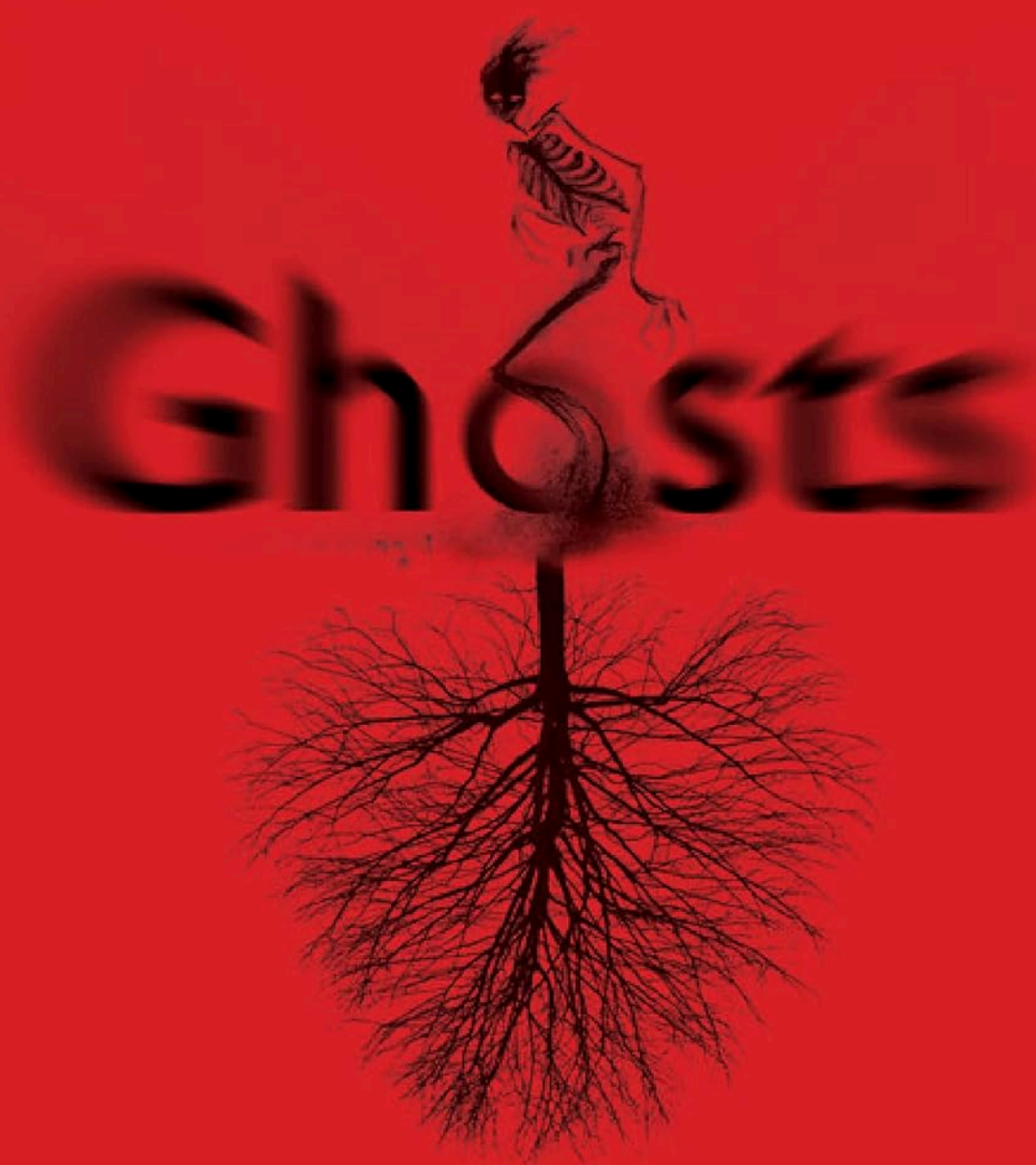
Ghosts

RIKSUNDAR
BANERJEE

ILLUSTRATIONS by RAKA CHOWDHURY

THE BOOK ON INDIAN GHOSTS
Riksundar Banerjee

Kirti Advani*

In the landscape of Indian ghost lore, few works have managed to capture the variety of imagination as Riksundar Banerjee's narration of ghost stories. Banerjee's book allows the reader to understand ghosts not just as supernatural entities but as beings that encompass complex social dynamics. The book was published by the Aleph Book Company in 2021.

The vastness of India's cultural, social and geographic landscape offers various approaches to singular questions and such is the case with ghost stories as well. From the Himalayan mountains to the South, and from the villages of Bengal to the Konkan region in the east, all places store compelling stories that Banerjee has collated through a mix of oral retellings, books written in regional languages and his own PhD research. Banerjee's Bengali upbringing has meant that the book has many stories from the region. Banerjee sees ghosts as encounters with the self rather than supernatural entities and therefore attempts to explore the socio-cultural, psychological and philosophical aspects of ghost stories. These entities serve as reflections of our desires, fears and socio political realities.

This diversity means that stories of ghosts exist in multitudes but all share similar themes. The biggest contribution of the genre lies in its dependence on social and political undercurrents. These stories reflect a mirror to the hierarchies present in society. For example, eating fish is sewn into the social fabric in Bengal and so the Mechho bhoot (fish eating ghost) is a common guest in the households of rural Bengal. The

second reason for the prevalence of this ghostly tradition lies in the human need to answer things that seem unexplainable at first glance. The fascination surrounding afterlife and death has meant that communities from all parts of the world turn to supernatural beings as an answer to this uncertainty. Each cultural ecosystem creates its idea of a world that emerges after death portrays that while the need for such imagination is common, the imagined conclusion has many variations. And these variations are telling of the times and traditions it emerges from.

Banerjee, in his book, highlights that a tilted majority of ghosts are female. He argues that it is because of the number of women who have been oppressed, tormented and silenced. And thus, ghosts become a manifestation of expression that did not exist earlier. Ghosts like Chedipe, Kichin, Lukha mukhi exemplify this frustration. Shaankchunni, Sheekolburi and Petni from the streets of Bengal torment those who abuse women and seek revenge and those who killed them. Perhaps as a precautionary mechanism to stop the prevalent violence against women. Such retellings also make the skeptical reader question the tradition. I assume a lady macbeth adjacent situation where the culprit is so moved by their guilt that they hallucinate a demon possessing them.

A second inquiry into the question of gender offers another explanation for the existence of some ghosts; exercising control through fear. By establishing the dangers and disordered nature of certain actions, the communities get a cognitive

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weapon to direct the actions of women. The 'Dayani' is a ghost that possesses women's bodies and has malicious magical powers. The only way to control a Dayani is by burning the body of the woman possessed. Much like the instances of witch hunting, such beliefs assume the authority of the society in deciding the good woman differentiated from the bad, and then removing the evil; which in many cases could just be disobedience to societal norms.

The use of ghost lore to instill fear expands outside the scope of gender as well. Ghosts like Munjya urge individuals to get married at the right age lest they are at risk of becoming the Munjya ghost, or dissuade them from going near peepul trees at night. The Aayeri ghost attacks those who harm natural resources and hunts those who hunt. The Ekanore and Malaundu ghosts come only for disobedient children and the tales of Nalle Ba exist to dissuade people from opening doors for dangerous strangers.

These beings become an answer to unanswered questions. One could assume that the lack of knowledge around mental and physical illnesses lead to the emergence of many of these ghosts. Women become vulnerable to mental health disorders during and after childbirth resulting in concerns like postpartum depression. Many ghosts like the Dakan Sakan cause illness in the minds and wombs of pregnant women; causing miscarriages and making the women go mad. Aacheri causes incurable health issues and Galai makes its victims kill themselves.
'
The foremost problem with Riksundar Banerjee's Book on Indian Ghosts is that while it recognises the primacy of social and political contexts in the creation of these supernatural beings, it does not situate individual stories in their particular contexts. The reader is left questioning the nature

of these stories, who were these told to and what were they then meant to achieve. For example, the Yakshi ghost from Kerala is often thought of to be a lower caste woman who has died and now preys on men by shapeshifting to be beautiful though is actually hideous to look at. Or that the ghost of the Brahmaditya from Bengal emerges when a young Brahmin boy dies. The Brahmaditya and Brahmarakshas; both emerging from the spirits of Brahmin individuals are revered and treated with respect. An enquiry into the caste and class traditions of each region would help the reader situate these stories in a more holistic manner.

The book lists a total of 84 ghost stories from various parts of the country in an alphabetical order, and therein lies the secondary problem. The book is unable to justify the author' decision to organise these stories alphabetically and leaves the reader in an assorted mess of stories to sift through. It can be suggested that these tales be organised perhaps by geographical regions, letting the reader connect cultural nuances of these stories.Perhaps the stories could be organised through various themes of childhood, gender, livelihood etc which also would let the reader understand the prevalence of ideas that permeate through multiple cultures.

The book offers a compelling introduction to the world of ghost lore and is perfect for young readers fascinated by such stories. It creates intrigue in the mind of the reader and manages to capture the attention through its simple narration style.