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The *Journal of Liberal Arts and Interdisciplinary Sciences (JLAIS)* is an international, peer-reviewed, open-access journal dedicated to advancing scholarship that bridges the liberal arts and scientific disciplines. As global societies grapple with the complexities of cultural globalisation, digital transformation, environmental sustainability, and socio-political shifts, the JLAIS aspires to become a beacon for scholarly excellence and intellectual curiosity. It aims to advance academic discourse and influence policymaking, education, and public understanding, thereby contributing to a more informed and interconnected world. The journal welcomes original research articles, reviews, essays, and case studies from various disciplines within the liberal arts and humanities and their intersections with science, technology, social sciences, and other fields.

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The *Journal of Liberal Arts and Interdisciplinary Sciences (JLAIS)* provide a global platform for original, peer-reviewed scholarship that integrates the liberal arts with social sciences, natural sciences, and applied fields. The journal fosters dialogue across disciplines, highlighting innovative research, critical inquiry, and creative thought that address complex challenges in an interconnected world.

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Animesh Shukla[1]

Abstract

Banality or Banality of Evil and Absolute are distinctly formulated concepts of Hannah Arendt. Absolute was formulated by Arendt in the context of the American and French Revolutions and also in regard to totalitarianism, whereas Banality was formulated by her in the context of the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem. Arendt never sought to analyze the possibilities of these two concepts being related to each other. However, the endeavor of this article is to emphasize that Banality and Absolute, far from being distinct from each other in actuality, presuppose each other. The said argument would be further explained by dividing the article into three sections. The first section analyzes the historical moment of absolute, which was witnessed in Nazi Germany, where the intrinsic relation between banality and absolute was experienced. The second section engages with the philosophical moment of the Absolute, wherein Kierkegaard's text *Fear and Trembling* is used as an instance to emphasize how the evocation of absolute presupposed banality in this philosophical moment. The third section would engage with Mario Vargas Llosa's novel *The Feast of the Goat*, which narrates another instance of how Absolute and Banality interpenetrate each other. The article would conclude with an emphasis on how a conception of ethics, which could be termed "grounded immanence", needs to be imagined to weaken the hold of Banality on modern humans.

Keywords

Banality, Absolute, Grounded Immanence, Totalitarianism

Introduction

The article is inspired by the two concepts of Hannah Arendt: Banality and Absolute.[1] The concept of Banality, or as Arendt would put it, Banality of Evil,

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was developed by Arendt in the context of the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, and the concept of Absolute was articulated by Arendt in regard to the distinction between the American and French Revolutions, along with the totalitarian understanding of law and its fixation on absolutes.

According to Arendt, the evil that the world witnessed in totalitarian regimes was far from inspired by any perverse sadism or by any satanic worldview that affirms killing millions of people for whatever reason; rather, the evil in totalitarian regimes was banal. It was banal because people who followed Hitler or Himmler, or Goebbels were not necessarily convinced of the viability of the final solution or of the utopia that an Aryan race could be fabricated on a global scale; rather, they just obeyed the top rung of Nazi leadership. They sent millions of people to death chambers, not necessarily because of any personal hatred for the Jews, but only because it was expected of them that they would follow orders, and in this, their banality or the banality of the evil was manifested. As Arendt (2003) would argue in her book *Responsibility and Judgment*,

> Out of the unwillingness or inability to choose one's example and one's company, and out of unwillingness or inability to relate to others through judgment, arise the real skandala, the real stumbling blocks which human powers can't remove because they were not caused by human and humanly understandable motives. Therein lies the horror and, at the same time, the banality of evil. (p. 146)

Blindly obeying a regime or someone, without that obedience being mediated by individual judgment, which is formed, as Arendt would argue, based on remembrances, which induces thinking, and based on thinking, we form judgments concerning individuals or political regimes (Arendt, 2003). Those who blindly obey without any mediation of thought as such are also bereft of any memories, which throw up images, past events, deeds, which could be mobilized to form correct judgments. The presence of memories in an individual also ensures that any worldly event they witness is mediated by them through their own memories, ensuring that the event is not subjected to a thoughtless swallowing, but rather is prejudiced. A tension is set up between the event happening in the world with its own facticity and our imagination of it, colored by our memories, which are activated by the sight of anything in the worldly event, and now there is the tension between the event as it is and our perception of it. Whatever illusions, fallacious judgments, may emanate from the process described above, no banality would ever emanate from it, because banality is a state of being in which the above-described process is conspicuous by its absence. The banal mind is absolved from all mental restlessness; this mind is serene as it is calmed by the Absolute.

Eichmann, whose trial led Arendt to develop the concept of Banality of Evil, was blessed with a mind that was calm and composed, as it was not plagued by the constant tension between memory, imagination, expectations, and judgments resulting therefrom; rather, his mind was content with the thought:

> Hitler may have been wrong all down the line, but one thing is beyond dispute: The man was able to work his way up from lance corporal in the German Army to Fuhrer of a people of almost eighty million…. His Success alone proved to me that I should subordinate myself to this man. (Arendt, 2006, p. 126)

The mind of Adolf Eichmann is fixated on the absolute success of Hitler and engages in no further effort to analyze the rise of Hitler's politics, thus attesting to his banality.

Absolute, just like Banality, is a presumptuous singular. The way Banality does away with all the restlessness of mental process in favor of serene thoughtlessness, Absolute, which is a political term, is Archimedean, as it implies a radical new beginning, a radical separation from the past, and a phenomenon that is strikingly distant from everyday concrete phenomena and their ensuing restlessness. Again, like Banality, the abode of the Absolute is not the plural everyday life of people, but the singular serenity of abstraction. A political regime, which is founded on the Absolute, is completely divorced from the citizens at large. The institutional structure of such a regime is Archimedean; it is imposed from the people from above, as the "Political"[2] of such a regime is not charged by, as Arendt would argue, the "working realities" (Arendt, 2006b) of the citizens at large, realities with which citizens of the concerned polity engage in their everyday lives. The political of the concerned polity, being founded not on the plural everyday realities of the citizens, could only be charged by absolutes like God, will of the people, will of the nation and the likewise, unlike working realities that acquire shape only along with the effort of many people, who constantly shape and re-shape the contours of working realties by their actions. Since working realities as a term signifies everyday life of the people, which inevitably involves strategizing, prudence, and aptness at getting things done, this implies that working reality as a term is insubstantial and without any strict adherence to any form. The insubstantiality and formlessness of working reality ensure that it generates action and perspective, which means that working reality is of restless nature, since it is not endowed with any pre-given abode; its abode forms with a given action of someone, but then gets demolished as someone else affects it with their own action. It also implies that working reality would never generate blind obedience, because it does not have any content of its own strong enough to generate obedience; it would only generate perspective and action. People would keep on challenging each other ideas. In the words of Arendt (1998), it would generate, like in Classical Greek times, an Agonal Spirit, where outdoing each other's actions by the splendor of one's action and perspective was the most dominating factor, which prompted the aristocrats of Athens, who participated in the affairs of the polis, to act and speak. In this vein, working reality would stimulate thought and not banality.

Absolute would generate no thought. Its images and words would not activate memory, thus initiating thinking, which leads to judgment; contrary to all these, absolutes would only generate veneration. What else would it generate since it does not originate from those domains of human life that are intense with plural action that constantly intersect among themselves! The origins of the Absolute are from some distant abstraction, which the imagination of everyday humans cannot fathom; the Absolute cannot be mediated by any human memory, as absolutes have never participated in our lives. For instance, absolutes like the will of the nation would never generate any remembrances, because the nation remains an abstraction, which people have experienced, if at all, only by the mediation of local cultures and customs. The nation, in isolation from all concrete and effective factors, would not strike any relationship with people. And if a polity is governed by such an Absolute, then it would cultivate thoughtlessness among its citizens, or it would presuppose that the citizens would be thoughtless. As only a thoughtless person would venerate a phenomenon which, far from striking any chord in them, remains conspicuously distant. Eichmann was never troubled by any thought that could have prompted him to investigate what lies beneath Hitler and his "success," which he held in awe. The figure of Hitler never generated in him any memory or any picture, which he could have contemplated and spoken about, and then eventually could have judged Hitler. However, Eichmann was without any memory, or at least his memory did not induce thinking; it could have relapsed to just like another bodily process that comes off and goes at its own volition. A polity could be based on an Absolute only if there is an abundance of people like Eichmann, who are incapable of thinking and all the restlessness ensuing from it, and could devote their lives to obeying a distant Absolute.

The article from this point onward is divided into three sections: The first section is on the historical moment of the Absolute, wherein it is analyzed precisely what the factors and modalities are through which totalitarian regimes manifested the commensuration of absolute and banality. The Second section is a study of two texts: one philosophical, that is, Soren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, and the other literary, that is, Mario Vargas Llosa's *The Feast of the Goat*. Through the analysis of these two texts, the endeavor is to emphasize how Banality and Absolute presuppose each other, and the banal attitude is not harmless ignorance; rather, it is already an implicit affirmation of the political, charged by an Absolute, and the Absolute can function only on the basis of wide-scale banality. The article concludes with an emphasis on how a conception of ethics, which is neither transcendental nor immanent and could be articulated as grounded immanence, which to explain itself further would metaphorically take recourse to Freudian psychoanalysis, needs to be conceived, which would weaken the Absolute inspired by banality.

Historical Moment of Absolute

Totalitarianism in Nazi Germany and Soviet Union under Stalin are classical examples of political systems that were charged by an Absolute in these two countries: In Soviet Union, the Absolute was the law of history, whose destiny was communism, and in Nazi Germany, the Absolute was law of nature, whose destiny was the creation of an Aryan race on a global level (Arendt, 2004).

Both the totalitarian regimes were geared toward the actualization of their absolutes, without any mediation from any worldly or practical realities. Arendt (2004) argues in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that, in any polity, the constitution of law may be guided by some absolute, such as God, Reason, or Nation. However, the actual law that is constituted is created by people who translate the Absolute into the temporal context in which laws are formulated. In this process, the purity of the Absolute becomes reified, and law, with all its solidity, inevitably leaves a lot of gaps that do not adhere to any strict form of codified law. Instead, these gaps invite manifold interpretations as to how law should be implemented in a situation where the law is silent. A constituted law, with a lot of gaps and ambiguities, which invites interpretations, is a law that engages people, provokes activity, and thinking. In a situation where no universal law is applicable, the situation needs to be legally dealt with. Such a situation would demand imagination and thinking on the part of those who are engaging with the situation, and since whatever perspective would eventually legally interpret the situation would inevitably be a perspective emanating from subjective memories culminating into a judgment of sorts, it being a subjective perspective would ensure that the consensus over the situation would soon be broken and another process would be initiated of further interpretation. Law in such a situation takes the shape of Arendtian political action, which always takes place in a plural sphere, whose form is always of perpetually opening all legal and political constellations, with the insistence that beneath those constellations lies secular speech and actions, rather than divinely ordained commands (Arendt, 1998).

Likewise, it can be argued that in a constituted law in which the Absolute is reified, resulting in a law, which invites multiple interpretation and political actions, a constituted law that stimulates thinking and is shaped by thoughtful speech and actions, such a constituted manmade law, which Arendt calls "Positive Law" (Arendt, 2004), stands in flagrant contradiction to an absolute law, which is without any gaps and ambiguities. No ambivalence ever gets manifested in an absolute law, which ensures that such an absolute law is founded on banality. As an absolute law, emerging from a location, which no human memory can relate to, as the Absolute is radical abstraction, heralding a beginning, which does not even remotely relate to the past, such an abstraction, such a new beginning can generate no remembrance among people, which is a repository of all human creativity and action. An absolute law would never be mediated and formed by any thoughtful human action, as absolute law never activates any memory, never throws up images of itself, with which people could relate, reflect, and eventually speak about. An absolute law could not even be spoken about. As only those entities offer themselves to human speech, which freely join the stream of human existence, absolutes which is strikingly distant from everyday existence could hardly be spoken about. It is here we understand as to why Eichmann's language was beset with clichés, stock phrase, and other such "language rules." Arendt (2006a, p. 86) argues, "Eichmann's great susceptibility to catch words and stock phrases, combined with his incapacity for ordinary speech, made him, of course, an ideal subject for 'language rules'." Eichmann's susceptibility to catch words and stock phrases was the result of the totalitarian regime in which he functioned, wherein the political was founded on an absolute. The political of such a regime never joined the stream of everyday existence, implying it can never become a phenomenon that could be spoken about. This led it to enunciate its own set of language rules, since the unfamiliarity of the Absolute with that of everyday existence could have led the Absolute to become an entity that cannot be spoken about. The only way to ensure that it does not happen, the recourse was to take stock phrases and clichés with which the Absolute would be referred to. Functionaries like

Eichmann of the totalitarian regime almost memorized those stock phrases to use them in various situations, as working under a singular absolute with its nauseating unworldliness has increasingly made them persons who do not interact with a situation. In all the novelty with which the situation presents itself, they would rather endeavor to offset the novelty of the situation by coming up with an apt stock phrase to suspend the novelty of the situation, and illusory make it submit to their absolute-dictated language rules. For functionaries of the totalitarian regime, the world has been exhausted by the Absolute and constantly repeats itself according to the Absolute. Just as our body is trained to respond to certain situations in a mechanical way, totalitarian functionaries respond with a catchword at the dawn of a new situation. The banality of the totalitarian functionaries is explained by their working in a regime whose ideals are not in the least reified; rather, the purity of the ideals demands the banality of those who are supposed to implement those ideals. Purity is divine, it is perfect, and without guilt; such purity can only inspire silence and not speech, which emanates with the presupposition that the world is imperfect, and the degrees of its imperfections could be reduced by constant negotiation and discussion. Purity has already joined the company of Gods. And does God speak? It is the profane world with its frail humans, which invites speech. As Arendt (2004) argues,

> It is the monstrous, yet seemingly unanswerable claim of totalitarian rule that far from being "lawless", it goes to the source of authority from which positive laws received their ultimate legitimation, that far from being arbitrary it is more obedient to these suprahuman forces than any government ever was before, and that far from wielding its power in the interest of one man, it is quite prepared to sacrifice everybody's vital immediate interests to the execution of what it assumes to be the law of History or the law of Nature. Its defiance of positive laws claims to be a higher form of legitimacy which, since it is inspired by the source themselves, can do away with petty legality. Totalitarian lawfulness pretends to have found a way to establish the rule of justice on earth- something which the legality of positive law admittedly never attain. The discrepancy between legality and justice could never be bridged because the standards of right and wrong into which positive law translates its own source of authority – "natural law" governing the whole universe, or divine law revealed in human history, or customs and traditions expressing the law common to the sentiments of all men – are necessarily general and must be valid for a countless and unpredictable number of cases, so that each concrete case with its unrepeatable set of circumstances somehow escapes it. (p. 595)

Positive law never seeks to realize absolutes on earth; it constitutes legality in which absolute ideals get reflected, without any pretension of actualizing them. The legal space, which is constituted through positive law, would never exhaust all the events that take place in the legal space, implying that there would be situations wherein individual decisions would decide a legal state of affairs rather than a codified law, and dealing with an event in all its novelty presupposes thought and thinking, and not banality. The totalitarian absolute law is solely geared toward the actualization of an absolute, implying that the totalitarian law presupposes that its supporters would be singularly dominated by the absolute goal. It is engaged with the concrete that stimulates thinking and creative responses. Even a selfish person engages in thought, as their stringent pursuit of self-interest is open to the public that responds to them accordingly, always being wary that this person, being as selfish as they are, would always endeavor to take advantage, which makes them circumspect toward them. The selfish person, knowing this, has to think of creative ways to deal with the situation. Any worldly way of being always requires thought because, in a world, our actions would not revolve in a void; they would affect other worldly people, who would respond in their own manner. However, a way of being, which is unworldly and fixated on the Absolute, can very well afford thoughtlessness. As thought is provoked when attention is paid to the immediate concerns, to those possibilities which arise from the immediate, but totalitarian is concerned only with the singular absolute, and least attention is paid to the fact how absolute would be mediated by the world, as insistence is only on the realization of the Absolute, even if the world with all its immediacy is sacrificed for it. Thought takes place when there is ever a possibility of discord and fraction, and ingenious ways have to be designed for those discordant situations. The possibility of discord and fractions, which are the preconditions of thought, could only take place in a plural sphere, whereas the Absolute occupies a singular sphere, with a singular concern of its realization. It hardly requires thought; what it does require is frantic soldiers, with no memory, no language to speak of, and no depth of being, but a commitment to realize the Absolute, which is incomprehensible because they do not know what good would be served by fulfilling the law of nature or history on earth (Arendt, 2004).

As Arendt (2006a, p. 145) argues, "He was quite capable of sending millions of people to their death, but he was not capable of talking about it in the appropriate manner without being given his 'language rule'." Absolute requires no language; also, it cannot be spoken about, as the domain of absolute is distant from our everyday lives, where the possibility of language lies.

Nazi totalitarianism believed in "organizational omnipotence" (Arendt, 2004). Nazis believed that everything is possible if the organization carries out its task in the precise manner with which it has been dictated. Nazis sincerely believed that the final solution could be implemented everywhere, if the organization would meet with its task, although it never occurred to them that it might not be possible to convince people to kill Jews for the larger purpose of the creation of an Aryan race, an ideal which might never have struck a chord in the normal German. They could not have conceived what that race would be, but still, they were with the Nazis because they were uprooted and lonely people who could not identify with the world, and there was no authority to bind them in a certain structure, which would generate remembrance among people. The rise of the secular age in Europe has not provided people with an authority that would bind and give them the kind of stability that Christianity, with its myths and legends of sacred beginning and sacred end, once provided. In modern times, people were uprooted from all ties of the past, and the only stability they could still feel was the biological processes of their bodies, which is strictly a lonely experience (Arendt, 2008).

> Loneliness, the common ground for terror, the essence of totalitarian government, and for ideology or logicality, the preparation of its executioners and victims, is closely connected with uprootedness and superfluousness which have the curse of modern masses since the beginning of the industrial revolution and have become acute with the rise of imperialism at the end of the nineteenth century and the break- down of political institutions and social traditions in our own time. (Arendt, 2004, p. 612)

The loneliness of the modern person, who lives without any foundations, provided impetus to the totalitarian belief that everything is possible, as being rooted in a world acquaints us with the specific possibilities of the world and also with the current impossibilities of the world. However, being uprooted from the world makes us oblivious to the world's possibilities and impossibilities. The totalitarian belief in everything is possible through organizational competence and is borne not out of engagement with the world but with the hysterical fixation on the Absolute, which inspires its own mechanical repetition. The caution of the world not only sets limits on our actions but also stirs our thoughts and engages us in finding out ways to actualize our ideals, if not absolutely, then only partially. It is in this vein that worldly-wise lawmakers constitute positive law, which reflects absolute ideals, whereas totalitarian banality endeavors to actualize the Absolute in the world.

The historical moment of the Absolute was commensurate with banality; Absolute and Banality, far from being distinct phenomena, in actuality interpenetrates each other. The world always positions us in the middle, and it is through thought that we manage our middle position in the world. Insistence on a position that sees the world from an Archimedean perspective not only forecloses the possibility of thought but also implicitly affirms banality.

Philosophical Moment of Absolute

The philosophical moment of the Absolute gets manifested in Soren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. The book is a praise of the Biblical legend of Abraham. It is praised because Abraham represents for Kierkegaard an extremity of existence, which cannot be mediated. Abraham's devotion to God is so absolute and solid that no Hegelian spirit could sunder its moments apart. It is difficult to write the content of Abraham's faith as his faith neither retains nor anticipates anything. His faith resides in his acts of devotion to God, and those acts are performed. Although the essence of Abraham's faith continues to reside in those devoted actions which he has already performed, the performance of those actions has not made his faith jump to some anticipations of a blessed hereafter in the company of God; rather, his faith continues to be there in those actions already performed and would be there in other devoted actions to come, and in nothing more.

The essence of Hegel's Spirit, which Kierkegaard is critiquing through the extreme figure of Abraham, functions through the mode of consciousness in which Hegel would argue a This or Here or Now is always constituted by plurality of Theses and Nows.

> What abides is a simple complex of many Heres. The Here that is meant would be the point; but it is not: on the contrary, when it is pointed out as something that is, the pointing-out something shows itself to be not an immediate knowing [of the point], but a movement from the Here that is meant through many Heres into the universal Here which is a plurality of Heres, just as the day is a simple plurality of Nows. (Hegel, 2008, p. 64)

According to Hegel, our consciousness never lets go of the past; it continues to resonate in our present affirmations and denials, implying that our present affirmation does not necessarily emanate from our present but harbors within itself the lived past. This harboring of the past in the present breaks out the solidity of the present and of its acts. From here, the march of Spirit begins, which forces all its moments apart, and insisting on one moment, becomes most unspirit-like. It is in this vein that we can argue that Hegelian spirit functions through the retention mode of our consciousness. As he would say, "Spirit is, in its simple truth, consciousness and forces its moments apart" (Hegel, 2008, p. 266).

The moments of Abraham's faith cannot be sundered apart because the only content of Abraham's consciousness is his faith, which is unconditionally unconditioned and contains the memories of the last devoted act toward God, and his devotion toward God continues to be the same. So, if Abraham performs any devoted act in the present, the concreteness of that act cannot be broken by insisting that it carries within itself a lurking retention of a less devoted act toward God. In Abraham's consciousness, there is no such retention; thus, the only content of Abraham's consciousness, as argued by Kierkegaard, is his devotion to God. Such a singularly devoted and unrestless consciousness cannot be mediated and raised to the level of Spirit.

As Kierkegaard (2003) argues,

> The Paradox of faith has lost the intermediate term, i.e. the universal. On the one hand it contains the expression of egoism (doing this dreadful deed for his own sake) and on the other the expression of the most absolute devotion (doing it for God's sake). Faith itself cannot be mediated into the universal, for in that case it would be cancelled. (p. 99)

The moments of Hegelian spirit are individual, particular, and universal. All of these moments are broken in themselves, which ensures that every moment of the Spirit interpenetrates each other. However, faith cannot be mediated into the universal because it is a pure moment; beneath it no profanity lurks. Abraham's action toward God represents such an extremity that cannot be spoken about, as Kierkegaard points out, "Talk he cannot, he speaks no human language" (Kierkegaard, 2003, p. 138), or "Abraham cannot speak" (p. 139). Abraham's inability to speak also represents, as Kierkegaard argues, his extreme egoism, which, because of its stringency, cannot be broken. Similarly, his faith cannot be mediated because of its fixity. It can be argued that Abraham's unworldly nature, manifested in his reluctance to speak and his relation to the Absolute without any mediation, attests why Abraham's faith cannot be mediated. As Kierkegaard (2003, p. 144) puts it, "So either there is a paradox, that the single individual as the particular stands in an absolute relation to the Absolute, or Abraham is done for."

The absoluteness of Abraham's faith is also the attestation of his Banality. As totalitarian absolute cannot be mediated since it lacks any relation with the world, it also cannot not be spoken about, except in clichés and stock-phrases, collectively referred by Arendt as "language rules". Similarly, Abraham's faith also could not be mediated, as the acts that are done for the sake of the faith are wordless; they cannot even be communicated to someone else. The only content of Eichmann's consciousness was following the orders of the Führer, and, in following it, he was not troubled by any memory or thought. The only content of Abraham's consciousness is following the orders of God, and, in so doing, he is also not troubled by any thought or memory. Now supposing that if Abraham would ever have been tried in a court of law and was inquired why did he follow God in such an absolute manner that in following it you have destroyed people, it is hard to conceive that Abraham would have defended himself in any other way then by using cliché or stock-phrases, an instance of it could be: "What could I have done, he asked me to kill Isaac."

In Kierkegaard's book, absolute and banality are commensurate with each other. As Abraham's devotion to God is absolute, it is the only content of his consciousness, which implies that Abraham's mind is not populated with any remembrances, which lays the foundation for thinking and prepares the ground for judging. The Abraham's portrait that Kierkegaard gives is of a mind not troubled by perpetual activation of memory and the ensuing restlessness; rather, the mind of Abraham is calm, singularly focused on God, a characteristic of mind that is a manifestation of banality.

Literary Moment of the Absolute

Mario Vargas Llosa's novel *The Feast of the Goat* is another instance of how intrinsic the relation is between Absolute and Banality (Llosa, 2012).

The novel is set in the Dominican Republic during the time when Rafael Trujillo was ruling the country. It narrates the various facets of Trujillo's rule over the country, most importantly, how the dictatorship of Trujillo affected the souls of Dominicans. It narrates Trujillo's rule over the country and the events related to it not in chronological sequence, but in the form of remembrances of a daughter named Urania Cabral, whose father, Agustin Cabral, was a prominent person in Trujillo's regime. Urania left the country when Trujillo was still in power and came back after 30 years to find her father in a seemingly vegetative state, dependent on others for fulfilling the most basic biological necessities of his life, not the least of the characteristics of a close aide of hypermasculine Trujillo. Urania Cabral remembers sitting next to her father, the times of her childhood, when Trujillo was in power. She narrates to her father what she was able to remember at that point. Her father apparently listens to what she narrates, and the only witness of his apparent capacity to listen is his eyes that change expressions as his daughter revisits the horror comic times of Trujillo ruling the country (Llosa, 2012).

Along with the remembrance of Urania Cabral, the novel also unfolds Trujillo's time through the remembrance of those assassins, who were waiting in their car for Trujillo to come, so that they could initiate the next step of their plan, which culminates in their Killing Trujillo and finishing his dictatorial reign in the country. While waiting, they remember and narrate their experiences with Trujillo's regime, most of which have been painful. The prominent among the assassins are Antonio Imbert, Antonio de la Maza, and Salvador Estrella Sadhala (Llosa, 2012).

The narrative of the novel, far from being consumed in an absolutist conception of time, where the only essence of time is linear sequencing of events, attempts to effect a sort of restlessness both to time and to the events enacted during Trujillo's rule. These events, with a singular focus on perpetuating his regime, now acquire a fictional, restless character, as now they are narrated not through the objectivity or concreteness of their original enactment, but as they are remembered. The act of masculine Trujillo gets fictionalized in the narration of *The Feast of the Goat*.

The novel narrates the commensurability of absolute and banality by showing that the people who were supporters of the absolute rule of Trujillo over the country were divested of even the most basic human emotions, which was also the result of the absolute identification they wanted to have with Trujillo. If the world, with its norms and minimal rules, was coming between them and their desired identification with Trujillo, then they would do away with the world for the mystical conception of a relationship with Trujillo. Here, just like previously in the case of Eichmann and Abraham, these would involve the emptying of their consciousness of all worldly contents. In the case of Eichmann, the only content of his consciousness was the Führer and his orders; in the case of Abraham, it was his devotion toward God; and in the case of supporters of Trujillo, it would be Trujillo's order and their execution of them. Next, we will look at a couple of instances to emphasize how certain elites of the Dominican Republic who were aides of Trujillo were banalized during his absolute rule.

Urania narrates to her father that once she had met an official of the World Bank, Senator Henry Chirinos, at an official occasion. Senator Chirinos was a very powerful person in Trujillo's regime, and he continues to be in high ranks even in the civilian Government of President Balaguer. Urania listens to how Chirinos narrates tales about Trujillo to other prominent people who were gathered on that day. One of the tales narrated by Chirinos to others caught her attention, and, in a way, suspended her for a moment, and a cold ran throughout her body. Chirinos was narrating that once Don Froilan, an aide of Trujillo, said something that was disliked by Trujillo, and he decided to humiliate Froilan "by humiliating him where it hurt most, in his honor as a man" (Llosa, 2012, p. 62). Chirinos started to narrate what Trujillo actually said to humiliate Froilan:

> "I have been a well-loved man. A man who has held in his arms the most beautiful women in this country. They have given me the energy to go on. Without them, I never could have done what I did" (He raised his glass to the light, examined the liquid, confirmed its transparency, the sharpness of its color.). "Do you know which was the best of all the cunts I fucked?" ("Forgive me, my friends, for the vulgarity",

> the diplomat (Chirinos) apologized, "I am quoting Trujillo exactly".). (He paused again, inhaled the bouquet of his glass of brandy. The silvery head looked for and found, in the circle of gentlemen listening to him, the fat, livid face of the minister. And he concluded:) "Froilan's wife!" (Llosa, 2012, p. 62)

What further disgusted Urania, as she continued narrating to her father, was the response of Don Froilan's, which she remembered Chirinos stating, "Don Froilan smiled heroically, laughed, celebrated with the others Chief's witticism. White as a sheet, not fainting, not falling down with a heart attack" (Llosa, 2012, p. 63).

Urania asks her father in astonishment why men have succumbed so terribly to Trujillo that even the most prevalent human emotions do not move them, as if the entire history that constitutes humans, which affects their actions, has been done away with, and the ensuing void is occupied by Trujillo.

> "How was it possible, Papa? How could a man like Froilan Arala, cultured, educated, intelligent, accept that? What did he do to all of you? What did he give you that turned Don Froilan, Chirinos, Manuel Alfonso, you, all his right- and left-hand men, into filthy rags?" (Llosa, 2012, p. 63)

They have become filthy rags because following an absolute leader has banalized them. Their consciousness has been emptied; it no longer contains any restlessness. Froilan has forgotten that mentioning somebody's wife in such an indecent manner is bound to cause a sense of anger and shame. Such anger and shame is a worldly phenomenon, but Froilan is oblivious to that. The content of his consciousness is Trujillo, which implies that he would be happy in anything Trujillo does, as Froilan is no longer an individual, but rather an extension and articulation of Trujillo's will. An absolute commitment to a leader like Trujillo presupposes banality.

Trujillo's men were wordless creatures; no worldly way of being ever visited them. They were always haunted by the possibility of what if Trujillo's latest mood swing would make them lose Trujillo's trust and favor. As the novel narrates that Trujillo always played with his allies the game of fear, he always made some movement to make sure that his allies were never confident and sure about themselves, rather always apprehensive. Trujillo did this for two reasons: first, to perpetuate his rule by keeping his allies in perpetual anxiety, so that they never were stabilized and start thinking and acting in ways that may harm the regime. Second, a person who is singularly concerned about perpetuating his rule, even after so strongly occupying it for so many years, can only hold on to life by precisely playing these games. Such a person develops the illusion that only they can decide the fate of the collective, and, in lieu of this, demolishes all acceptable authorities. Then they turn inwards, seeking within themselves the key to govern and enlighten the community or the nation, but sadly, they only find a fragile, perpetually moving body with its processes. This banal body is interpreted by dictatorial leaders as the key for the nation, and this process is projected onto the outside world, where every day someone is losing favor, someone is gaining it, and then losing it again. It goes on without rhyme and reason, just like our body and other natural processes (Arendt, 1998).

Trujillo expressed this in the novel, when, during a conversation with President Balaguer, Trujillo feels that Balaguer is seemingly very confident about himself, which makes Trujillo think, "Was he going too far? Had he succumbed, like Egghead (Agustin Cabral, Urania's father, who has earned the animosity of Trujillo), to the idiocy of believing himself safe, and did he also need a dose of reality? A curious character, Joaquin Balaguer" (Llosa, 2012, p. 260)

What saves humans from being subjected to the potential arbitrariness of fellow humans, of their arbitrary wills and mood swings, are institutions and norms of the world, which give them a certain permanence of being, even if they witness pathological traits all around them. It is the world that soothes our paranoia and acquaints us that there is always more to the world than what few men can imagine or conceptualize.

Trujillo's aides have broken up with the world; their consciousness, instead of swarming with the contents and way of being in the world, in actuality, has plunged into the Absolute figure of Trujillo. But the plunge in the Absolute Trujillo has only earned them perpetual bouts of anxiety and fear. Perhaps only to these they were fated, as they had imagined that Trujillo carried divinity in him and the plunge would be their salvation; however, alas, Trujillo was human! Since they were now one with Trujillo, they were the projections of Trujillo's natural body, which can never be stabilized and would always be in motion. The Banality of Trujillo's men was the result of their fixation on Trujillo.

The banality of Trujillo's men had evil manifestations, which gets expressed only in the end of novel when Urania narrates to her Aunt Adelina and others that Manuel Alfonso persuaded her father to send his daughter Urania, then only a little girl, to Trujillo, to sleep with him, to sacrifice his virgin daughter at the altar of Trujillo, so that he could regain the his favor, which he has recently lost! Manuel Alfonso to Cabral (Urania's Father),

> Do you know something, Egghead? I wouldn't have hesitated for a second. Not to regain his confidence, not to show him that I'm capable of any sacrifice for him. Simply because nothing would give me more satisfaction, more happiness, than to have the Chief give pleasure to a daughter of mine and take his pleasure with her. (Llosa, 2012, p. 314)

The Banal Egghead agreed to this proposition.

Conclusion

In modern times, as Arendt would argue, there is a crisis of authority. The Roman Trinity of religion, authority, and tradition that gave the then Romans a structure, which their present temporal actions had to preserve—the present temporal actions for the sake of augmenting and preserving the foundation of the city of Rome. This gave the Romans a past, a depth, which mediated their present actions (Arendt, 2008). The sense of time for the then Romans would not have been time as pure chronological sequence; rather, time for the Romans had a meaning, as they had to perform actions and take decisions, which would break the pure sequentiality of time and give it a meaning. This is in consonance with the Roman ideal of preserving and auguring the foundation of the city. This is in contrast to the moderns, who are swept up by the flow of time and thus encapsulated in the Absolute conception of time as flow, resulting in their banality. Their banality is the result of their inaction in relation to time and other entities. The act of giving meaning to something, even prejudicial, fictional, or illusory, still remains a thoughtful act, and thus antithetical to banality, which is the incapability to think. Banality, on the other hand, is manifested when we receive things as they are and agree to go along; for instance, if time is a flow, then we would flow with it.

The other reason behind the fixation of the moderns toward the Absolute and their ensuing Banality is that, as Arendt would argue, when authority disappears from the modern world, the only entity left, which still offers some permanence and is available for experience, is the human body, with its natural processes (Arendt, 1998). The retreat of modern humans to their bodies as the only source of understanding and shaping reality affirmed for them the modern concept of time as a flow, unarrested by the past, along with the belief that it's possible to actualize the law of nature or history on earth (Arendt, 2004). The retreat of modern humans to their bodies creates a void, which could be occupied by absolutes. The Absolutes go unresisted by modern humans because of their sole reliance on their bodies for understanding reality, and since the body is only a flow, in which everything comes and goes, the modern human believes that the Absolute reality would also follow this motion of flow. The lack of those institutions in modern times, which could generate remembrance among people, further contributes to their banality. Without memory, modern humans are only a mass, without any character or depth (Arendt, 2003).

It is in this regard that an ethics needs to be envisaged, which insists on the ground, prompting people to act in some way to give meaning to things, almost as if they would not act, the ground would devour them. The ground provides people the basis to act; it provides the energy to act, and if they do not, then this ground would paralyze them. The metaphor for such a conception of ethics as grounded immanence could be Freudian psychoanalysis. As Freud would argue that we receive all our energies from our unconscious, it alone carries all the resources with which we can work in our everyday life, but at the same time, the unconscious drives are expenditure-oriented. The unconscious knows nothing about the retention of energy, the expenditure-oriented nature of the unconscious, which wants to satisfy its drives even at the risk of annihilation of the person carrying these energies. This nature of the unconscious conflicts with our civilized mode of being, with the larger civilization, which runs on the principle of economy of energy (Freud, 2003a). This conflict between our unconscious and our ego (which manages our everyday life) can never be completely resolved; it can only be managed. According to Freud in 2005, ingenious ways need to be invented to sublimate some quantity of unconscious intensity in different sets of works so as to ensure that there is no build-up of cumulative, inevitably repressed intensities of the unconscious, which would force its way up to our ego, which would eventually leads to neurosis. Further, Freud (2003b) argues in *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*,

> There is nothing in the Es(Unconscious) that could be compared to negation; we are also surprised to find in it an exception to the philosophers' assertion that time and space are necessary forms of our own psychical acts. There is nothing in the Es that corresponds to a concept of time; no recognition of the passage of time; and- and this is particularly remarkable and awaits philosophical consideration- no change in its psychical processes as time passes. Both wish-impulses that have never gone beyond the bounds of the Es through repression, are virtually immortal; even after decades, they behave as if they had only just happened. They can only be cancelled out, robbed of the energy invested in them, and recognize as belonging to the past, if they have been made conscious through psychoanalytical work; and the therapeutic effect of analytic treatment on this to no small extent. (p. 68)

The unconscious could serve as the metaphor for a permanent ground, which the ethics as grounded immanence conceives; and the sublimation—robbing the energy—could serve as the metaphor for meaningful, thoughtful actions which, the ethics argues, are meant to weaken the hold of banality on modern men.

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1. In the article, those conceptions of the Absolute would be considered as Banal that are drastically singular: those who are conspicuously liberated from all the constraints and complications of the world. The inspiration for this article is the thought of Hannah Arendt. Arendt developed the concepts of Absolute and Banal at different stages of her intellectual journey and never attempted to consider the possibilities of them being related to each other. However, the author of this article is endeavoring to see the possibilities of considering Absolute and Banal as entities that presuppose each other. The aim of this article is not a puritanical presentation of Arendt's thoughts but to perform a fictional stretch on Arendtian concept of Absolute and Banality. The justification of such a fictional stretch of concepts could be sought in the thought of Jacques Lacan. Lacan argued that a psychoanalyst analyzing a neurotic patient also undergoes the mirror stage. This implies that the psychoanalyst should also endeavor to dialectically open their own imaginary structure by bringing the real to the surface, for only then can an intersubjective space be created in which speech serves to evoke rather than to inform, and it is through evocation that political spaces are created, where information insists on current political constellations. Similarly, a fictional stretch of Arendtian concepts would create conditions for speech and open new avenues for politics, whereas a puritanical analysis of Arendt's thought would insist on the imaginary subjectivity of Hannah Arendt.
2. The usage of the word "political" here is inspired by the thought of Carl Schmitt.

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Article

To Fear or Not to Fear: Paul Atreides, an Accidental Hero Caught in the Hamletian Loop in Denis Villeneuve's Screen Adaptation (Dune: Part One, 2021) of Frank Herbert's Dune Chronicles (1965–1985)

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Abstract

The story of *Dune*, as adapted for the screen by Villeneuve (2021, *Dune: Part One* [Film]), takes place in the year 10,191 (After Guild) of the Universal Standard Calendar to dramatise the imperial clash between the House of Atreides and the House of Harkonnen over the desert colony Arrakis and the control over the spice trade. Though *Dune* is an allegory that makes ecology and imperialism its chief rallying points, the thrust of this article is the central protagonist, Paul Atreides and the riddling relation he shares with his mother (his father's concubine) Lady Jessica. It attempts to portray Paul as not a Messiah or the chosen one but as a wronged, circumstantial hero who is tormented by his neurosis, daydreams and diabolical visions triggered by his repressed emotions clouding his unconscious. The article argues that Villeneuve's (2021, *Dune: Part One* [Film]) cinematic adaptation of Frank Herbert's 1965 novel *Dune* highlights the vulnerability of the Hamletian hero, who is grappling with pre-destined choices and a lack of free will, and appears frail and unheroic. Paul's actions in the drama alongside Lady Jessica and the Bene Gesserit sisterhood are an offshoot of the

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repressed emotions that play in his unconscious (often appearing as dream imagery). Paul's entry into the symbolic order is through his servility to his mother, who holds the power to language acquisition, through her use of the 'Voice'. The primary thrust of this work is to put forth a psychoanalytic reading of the character of Paul Atreides and his role as the chosen one (Lisan-Al-Gaib) in the Dune universe. Drawing on psychoanalytic theories of Freudian repression, Lacanian-postmodern theories of fragmented identity, and the ideologies behind messianism, along with the politics of language control as demonstrated in the adaptation, this work provides an in-depth analysis of the psyche of Paul Atreides through evaluation of key scenes and character moments like the Gom Jabbar test and the Voice training sequence.

Keywords

Repression, Hamletian, Voice, messianism, unconscious, free will

Rolling over the sea
You can see the spice in the air.

When Frank Herbert was working on a 1957 article about a certain foliage that could halt the progress of desert lands, little did he know that 'They Stopped the Moving Sands' would become, in a lengthier version, the next ecological cult classic. *Dune*, written in 1965 (and followed by sequels till 1985), was a retro-reflection of George Herbert that became an instant classic with the stunning array of thematic concerns, spanning different planetary spaces and covering interstellar expanses. The tale is rooted in an imperial expedition to the desert planet Arrakis for the trade of spice, which eventually ensues a rivalry between the House of Atreides and the House of Harkonnen for colonial control. The Spice Rush becomes a vanishing point for the two planetarian dynasties to outdo each other in a power struggle, leaving the oppressed natives (Fremen) no choice but to rebel. If Herbert's classic is about the anxieties surrounding imperial rule, native subordination, trade wars and ecological disaster, this research attempts to broach a less hyped subject: the role of Paul Atreides as an accidental Messiah, and his relational dynamics with his mother, Lady Jessica, and the Bene Gesserit sisterhood. This research study, though acknowledging the political subtext and the environmental discourse, attempts to throw light on the central protagonist, Paul Atreides, whose status as a flawed hero against the backdrop of an alarming rise of messianism is highlighted. Treating the adaptation as a Hamlet-esque allegory, this article bases its argument on the complex relation that Paul Atreides shares with his mother, the concubine of Duke Leto, Lady Jessica. Similar to the Shakespearean tragic hero, Paul is internally rifted by the schism between his moral duty as a son whose father has been recently assassinated and the dilemma to replace him. Paul crumbles under the pressure of performance as the Bene Gesserit sisterhood and his own mother forcefully assign him his fate by declaring him the Messiah. Paul Atreides, in this study, is represented as someone with similar Hamletian traits, suffering from inaction, inertia and lack of resolve triggered by his repressed emotions in the unconscious that find an escape route through his visions. This study argues that the cinematic adaptation represents the coming-of-age tale of a young Paul Atreides whose tryst with heroism is a seeming manipulation of a pre-destined arrangement that imposes a crown and subjects him, a boy still grappling with his philosophical doubts and suppressed instincts. Robbed of any agential power, it appears as if Paul is a mere figurehead; a chosen hero acting on the promptings of his mother, Lady Jessica, and the Bene Gesserit sisterhood. Paul's intricate relation with his mother, Lady Jessica, is founded on the manipulations and eugenic schemes of the Bene Gesserit sisterhood to which Lady Jessica belongs. The sisterhood is a religious cult cum biological manipulator that appoints Paul Atreides as Kwisatz Haderach (a male Bene Gesserit) to assume messianic properties in the race to control the spice trade in Arrakis. Paul serves as a dramatic prop, an incidental hero who is merely caught up in the events leading to his fate as the chosen one. Thus, the intent of this article is to provide a psychoanalytic reading of the ambivalent relation between Lady Jessica and Paul Atreides against the context of his circumstantial role as the Messiah.

'I serve only one master, his name is Shai-Hulud'.

This emphatic confession by ecologist Dr Leit Kynes of the desert planet Arrakis sums up the spectacular role spice plays; it is that hallucinogenic that causes altered states, bends the mind, stretches consciousness, expands life and facilitates space travel. Herbert's well-grounded research on sand dunes resulted in a post-colonial science fiction that borders on powerful thematic concerns around ecology, imperialism and power. Moreover, a sharp undercurrent of the power struggle between male and female seems to propel the dramatic action forward. The sisterhood of Bene Gesserit is clearly implicated in the ideological scheme of eugenics and the selective breeding of female heirs to win dynastic wars. However, Lady Jessica incurred the wrath of the sisterhood in manipulating the bloodline to bear a male heir. Consequently, she was scorned by the Reverend Mother, who mourned the loss and waste of power in a male agent, Paul Atreides. Paul thus becomes the circumstantial Messiah who is chosen to act as a foil against the onslaught of imperialists in controlling the spice trade and in ruling the Dune universe and the native Fremen. After the sudden assassination of his father, Duke Leto Atreides, Paul realised that the Bene Gesserit sisterhood and his mother navigated the politics of the Imperium from the shadows. To achieve their goal, the Reverend Mother and Lady Jessica tutored Paul for a future Messiah-ship through mind and Voice control. Interestingly, the specific scene set in the breakfast parlour where Lady Jessica struggles to train Paul on Voice command is an improvised addition to the George Herbert classic. Therefore, Paul Atreides follows a pre-destined trajectory of succeeding his father to control the outer space and spice set up by the conspiratorial designs of his mother through the Bene Gesserit sisterhood. Part of the argument of this study is grounded on Freudian analysis of the Hamlet-like mental conflict that Paul experiences in his difficult relationship with his mother, Lady Jessica. A key idea in Freudian psychoanalysis is the deployment of defence mechanisms. Ego defence mechanisms shield the subconscious from hurtful feelings or thoughts. It represses internal conflicts and can often lead to evading uncomfortable realities. There are many categories of defence mechanisms like repression, denial, projection and sublimation. Freudian repression theory is integral to psychoanalysis, and it suggests that the ego unwittingly drives dangerous thoughts, memories and desires out of conscious awareness into the unconscious to avoid distress. The theory was proposed first by Sigmund Freud in the late 19th century, in *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), co-authored with Josef Breuer. Boag (2006), in his *Freudian Repression, the Common View, and Pathological Science*, elaborates on the concept of repression as coined by Sigmund Freud;

> The term 'repressed' (verdrängt) appears for the first time in Breuer and Freud's Preliminary Communication (1893, in Breuer & Freud, 1895). Here, 'traumatic' memories are inaccessible due to motivated forgetting: …it was a question of things which the patient wished to forget, and therefore intentionally repressed from his conscious thought and inhibited and suppressed. (Breuer & Freud, 1895, p. 10)

Repression here is defensive, a 'fending off' preventing 'incompatible ideas' that arouse unpleasure (such as shame, self-reproach or psychical pain) from association with conscious thinking (Freud, in Breuer & Freud, 1895, p. 157) (Boag, 2006, p. 75). Sari et al. (2023), in their joint work *Exploring Freudian Defense Mechanism Theory in the Portrayal of Paul Atreides in the Movie Dune* selects the Gom Jabbar scene as an example of potential repression. The authors point out how,

> Paul undergoes severe pain in the Gom Jabbar test as his hand is placed inside a box and a poisoned needle is placed close to his neck by Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam. The purpose of the test is to evaluate someone's ability to restrain their emotions and instincts. His reaction to the pain could be interpreted as a representation of Paul's internal struggles associated with his uncertain future. The scene may imply that Paul hides his agony and fear to some extent in an effort to show that he has emotional control in the face of a potentially fatal circumstance. (Sari et al., 2023, p. 322)

Sari et al. (2023) further state:

> Paul's experiences with trauma, such as the disruption of his family's history and the discovery of his prophetic gifts, illustrate repression. He conceals painful memories and desires, which expose a complicated internal battle that influences his choices and actions throughout the story. In addition to suppressing memories, Paul Atreides demonstrates repression through a complex emotional journey. His battle with the weight of fate and heritage generates a psychological environment in which repression functions as an essential coping mechanism for traumatic events. Paul struggles with opposing wants and moral dilemmas in addition to repressing memories; this is a complex form of repression. His attempts to repress these contradictory feelings and goals are consistent with Freudian theory, which holds that repression involves a wider range of psychological substances than just forgetting memories. To add, the way Paul's inner world is shown in the film—through dream sequences, visions and reflective moments—provides a window into the depths of his repression. (Sari et al., 2023, p. 324)

Parkerson (1998), in his *Semantics, General Semantics and Ecology in George Herbert's Dune*, draws attention to Herbert's decision to examine the messianic superhero against an ecological backdrop as no accident. Herbert's own words can testify to his intense aversion to the dogmatic roles such propagandists play:

> I had already written several pieces about ecological matters, but my superhero concept filled me with a concern that ecology might be the next banner for demagogues and would-be heroes, for the power seekers and others ready to find an 'adrenaline high' in the launching of a new crusade. I could begin to see the shape of a global problem, no part of it separated from any other- social ecology, political ecology, economic ecology. (*Dune* Genesis, p. 74)

Parkerson (1998) points out how Herbert's belief in a specific language of an ecosystem produced *Dune* that 'explores the wielding of political, economic and military power, and, by incorporating aspects of general semantics, their common thread: the power of language' (p. 404). He further mentions:

> The importance of general semantics in *Dune* must be addressed for two reasons. First, it emphasised the importance of language and other cultural givens in providing a fundamental, unconscious structure for human thought and behaviour; and second, it insisted it was possible to train human beings into new semantic habits and an orientation toward first-order experience. (Parkerson, 1998, p. 405)

The role of Semantics is a constant ploy in *Dune*, specifically in the operation of the Bene Gesserit school. The school set up for the mental training of females runs a programme of eugenics through which it produces the perfect clone, genetically engineered to embody superhuman mental powers dubbed the Kwisatz Haderach (one who can be in many places at once). In order to fulfil their agenda, the Bene Gesserit sisterhood deploys the power of non-verbal communication, particularly 'gestures' that function like a strange but effective 'mind-speak'. In the cinematic adaptation of *Dune: Part One* (2021), Villeneuve demonstrates the representational power of gestures in the quietly combative scene between Paul and the Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam, in the presence of Lady Jessica. The entire scene takes place practically through the frugality of semantics, non-verbal speech and gestures that communicate the sceptical position Paul holds in reference to the powerful sisterhood and how his cautious and controlled respect for the Reverend Mother springs from his reluctant bond with his own mother, Lady Jessica. This unnatural bond becomes more explicit when, after the first training by the secret sisterhood, Paul lashed out at Lady Jessica about his mental equilibrium, 'They have turned me into a freak! (*Dune: Part One*, 2021)'.

Paul is also subjected to a regime of subservience through the use of the Voice; different intonations of the Voice by the user command the follower to obey instructions. The Voice is persistently used by both the Bene Gesserit sisterhood and Lady Jessica to train and control Paul. Lady Jessica's superiority springs from her ability to critically analyse and deploy the semantics of control (the Voice) through which she not only dominates Paul but also potential enemies encountered from the Imperium and the Fremen. Eventually, it is through Lady Jessica's use of this semantics of power that she wins the fidelity of the Fremen for whom 'the mother (Jessica) and the son (Paul) are both the chosen one'.

In *Voice Lessons: The Seductive Appeal of Vocal Control* in Frank Herbert's *Dune*, Mack (2011) defines the Voice as:

> The meticulous adjustment of personal vocal tones to mirror a target's own. Performed correctly, the Voice results in a frighteningly irresistible mental suggestion directed toward a hapless pawn. By assuming a voice uniquely keyed to each of her victims, then, a Bene Gesserit can almost unnoticeably bend the willpower of other characters in the novel by merely speaking to them. (Mack, 2011, p. 39)

Mack (2011) further observes, 'By constructing the Voice as a dimension of communication beyond signification, as an inherently feminine or motherly trait, and as a unique bond between self and other, Herbert taps into aspects of the Voice that haunt contemporary speaking subjects' (p. 41). It is evident then that the tool of para-linguistics (and the Voice) helps the Bene Gesserit sisterhood to not only monitor their own space and identify their friends and enemies through examination of speech patterns, but also to utilise it as a weapon of mind-control.

Encountering the M-Other: Mother as the abject.
'Dreams are messages from the deep'

When Jacques Lacan revised certain Freudian premises of modern psychoanalysis (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2022), he stirred a whirlwind of new ideas ('The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience', delivered in 1949 at the IPA conference in Zurich and later included in his *Ecrits*, 1966). The subject in psychoanalytic studies evolved through three different phases, the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real, according to Jacques Lacan. The imaginary order (the mirror stage) is that in which the subject is obsessed with one's image, almost in a narcissistic fashion (but it is just an imaginary version of the self). Seeing oneself as a composite whole is the pre-emptive of this phase, the ego is not divided into an *I* and *me*, hence there is no acknowledgement of the Other. Before the tragic assassination of Paul's father, Duke Leto Atreides, young Paul functioned almost as a boy, imagining his position as independent from his mother and defined by his extreme proximity with his father; however, when Lady Jessica (and the Bene Gesserit) intervened to discipline and train Paul through mental semantics and the Voice that young Paul enters the symbolic order of language acquisition. Lacan's symbolic order is the phase when the subject enters the normative world of social action through accessing language and accepting the authority of the father (the law of the father) becomes imminent for the subject at this point. This study points out how a psychoanalytic reading of the character of Paul Atreides takes us to his entry into the symbolic order, where, through the acquisition of semantics, Paul accedes to the authority of the mother instead of the father. Lady Jessica and the Bene Gesserit sisterhood train Paul to accept the dominance of the mother and fit into the leadership role (as the chosen one) imposed on him by the pre-fabricated circumstances in which he is placed. If the symbolic order is more about the unconscious (structured like a language, according to Lacanian dictum), Paul's attainment of the symbolic order also reveals the dark crevices of his unconscious, exemplified by the (latent) repressed emotions he experiences and the visitations of prophetic visions and complex dreams that become prominent during this period. The real order, according to Lacan, is bound with the mother, a site of total identification which gets disrupted by the subject's entry into the socio-linguistic structure: the symbolic phase that severs the real. The symbolic order in the terminology of Jacques Lacan, is therefore that penultimate peak where one encounters the M-Other through language. If the imaginary stage is the pre-linguistic and pre-oedipal stage, it is the symbolic order that ushers the subject into the idea of difference; the idea that linguistic signs are constituted by difference (absence/lack), and that likewise identities are constituted by sexual difference. Therefore, if language is operational through lack or difference, it brings the subject to the notion of desire for a lost (absent) object, in the cinematic adaptation of *Dune*: *Part One* (2021), Paul Atreides eventually succumbs to the restrained emotions of his unconscious (return of the repressed) harboured against Lady Jessica as he gradually acquires the power of language (marks Paul's entry into the symbolic order: the authority of the Mother). One of the earliest scenes of tutelage appears in the onscreen adaptation where Lady Jessica instructs Paul 'to use the Voice' for simple commands. At this point, Lady Jessica's interrogation regarding Paul's dreams (She asks, 'More dreams?') leads us to a strange twist when Paul answers in the negative. The antagonism, scepticism and mistrust that Paul felt for Lady Jessica become evident in a later scene where Paul shares his dreams (the unconscious) instead with his uncle Duncan Idaho.

> Paul: I have been having dreams, I saw you lying dead, fallen in battle…
> Duncan: Dreams make good stories, but everything important happens when we are awake.

With the gradual mastery of the Voice, Paul himself comes to acknowledge 'the Other' through his unconscious (also his dreams). During his interaction with the Reverend Mother Helen Mohiam, Paul also encounters his own sense of abject (here Fear) for the M-other manifested through the desire to master and use the Voice against the Bene Gesserit sisterhood whose commands he wants to resist. Let us examine the terse repartee that takes place between Paul and the Reverend Mother. When the Reverend Mother commands Paul to kneel before her, the underlying power struggle comes to the fore.

> Paul: How dare you use the Voice on me?
> Reverend Mother: Your mother bade you obey me.

In *Voice Lessons: The Seductive Appeal of Vocal Control* in Frank Herbert's *Dune*, Mack (2011) clearly outlines how:

Herbert structures the Voice as the Bene Gesserit's direct access to another character's subconscious. A victim of the Voice cannot easily resist a stylised command because their understands the directive as incorporating aspects of his/her own Voice, a twisted form of persuasive self-talk (Mack, 2011, p. 44). It is then followed by a pain test that Paul successfully passes, and earns recognition of his inner prowess by the Reverend Mother herself: 'If you had been unable to control your impulses like an animal, we could not let you live'. The control of impulses points to how neatly structured Paul's unconscious is during this phase, unlike the Id in psychoanalytic thinking, this zone of repressed desires uncovered through the unconscious acts like the superego, perfected by the use of semantics (the Voice and other non-verbal cues and gestures) as Paul initiates his rites on entering the symbolic order. Again, there is a mention of his dreams.

Reverend Mother: Tell me about these dreams.
Paul: I had one tonight.
Reverend Mother: What did you see?
Paul: A girl. On Arrakis.
Reverend Mother: Have you dreamt of her before?
Paul: Many times.
Reverend Mother: Do you often dream things that happen just as you dream them?
Paul: Not exactly.

Paul Atreides is slowly invoked into the symbolic order through accession to specific semantics tutored by his mother, whom he finally wishes to replace in order to function as the chosen one. After the untimely assassination of Duke Leto Atreides, Paul is circumstantially chosen as the deliverer of political catharsis. The preparation of a hero was part of the nefarious design of the Bene Gesserit sisterhood; the only difference is that they usually bred only females, and Paul was a male. When Lady Jessica confesses that the Bene Gesserit sisterhood has existed for thousands of years, 'has crossed bloodlines to bring forth the One', Paul realises that it is 'All part of a plan'; and that his pre-destined career has been carefully appointed through 'selective breeding'. Reacting to the chant of 'Lisan-Al-Gaib' by the native Fremen, Lady Jessica tells Paul that 'These people have been waiting for centuries for Lisan-Al-Gaib—now they see Paul and see the signs … The Bene Gesserit school has been preparing the way', to which Paul retorts, 'Or actually planting superstitions … They see what they have been told to see'. This makes him a provisional hero.

Paul is forced to follow the dictates of the Mother; the law of the Mother is the high semantics: the use of the Voice, gestures, haptics and kinesics of sign language through which he is sworn into the symbolic order. Inheriting the sociolinguistics of the mother (the gestures and sign language used before the Bene Gesserit to display reverence and respect, the sign language used when met with authoritarian subversion and opposition, for example, talking in codes among spies and enemies like the Harkonnen assassins and the Fremen warriors) is the unique legacy of Paul Atreides. Later on, when a Fremen woman named Shadout

Mapes greets Lady Jessica as the 'Lisan-Al-Gaib—the Mother and the Son as one', it appears that the sense of abject seems to spring from Paul's own self, and is directed against his M-Other, both hailed together as the One by the Fremen. Paul's abject springs from his repressed emotions in the unconscious and manifests itself in the Fear for the Other, the other which is both internalised as an alterity in the unconscious as well as externalised in the figure of the M-Other (Lady Jessica). Paul's translocation from the imaginary order to the symbolic order occurs precisely when he encounters his mother (as the other) through accepting the normative world of semantics that Lady Jessica disciplines him in. That pedagogy is the starting point of his confronting the other. Mack (2011) notes, 'Paul's subjectivity is guaranteed and sustained through Jessica's Voice, but the inescapable, sonic link to his mother paradoxically threatens the very sense of self it constructs' (p. 50). Mack further notes that 'the Voice complicates the typically clear division between interior self and exterior Other and is used to support a stifling biological determinism in *Dune*' (p. 51). On the other hand, 'Jessica feels no anxiety toward the Other at the base of her Voice because its very presence ultimately allows her to command the Other' (Mack, 2011, p. 56). This phase is densely scattered with hallucinations, dreams and visions that underlie repressed emotions in the unconscious. Paul shares with Lady Jessica one such vision that he is constantly visited by (the initial reluctance to share his dreams with Lady Jessica gradually disappears as Paul becomes subjected to the law of the Mother in the symbolic order).

> Paul: It was confusing, I thought I saw my death. Only it was not. I know a knife is important somehow. Someone will hand me a blade. But I do not know who or when or where. Some things, though, are crystal clear. I can feel it. I know you are pregnant.
> Lady Jessica: You cannot know that. I barely know it.

In this apocalyptic vision Paul sees a Fremen native woman called Chani who seduces him to finally draw out her secret weapon (a crysknife) with the intent of murder, but the vision is fragmented and Paul is left with a certain doubleness of the vision that leaves him confused between the mysterious woman Chani and his own mother Lady Jessica (as the prophetic dream/s overlap with reality). Let us define what *abject* signifies according to its proponent, Kristeva (1982), in her monumental work, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980). As proposed by her, abjection is connected with an unfavourable reaction such as disgust, revulsion or horror caused by confrontation with an object that attempts to break down the division between self and the other (or subject and object in Lacanian terms). Thus, to be in a state of abjection is to feel disgust when faced by objects that menace to cross (or do cross) the limit/boundary. This leads to a collapse of signification, which results in the emotion of repugnance and revolt. Kristeva (1982) suggests that the prime object of abjection, the child, must decline the mother to become a sovereign subject. Yet, the mother lingers on the bound/limit/margin, making her both coveted and repulsive, as the 'violent, visceral reaction of horror and disgust—the "retching"—experienced when confronting the breakdown of boundaries between self and other, or subject and object…The abject would thus be the "object" of primal repression' (Kristeva, 1982, p. 12). When Paul visualises his own death (It was confusing, I thought I saw my death), it is nothing but his abject (tied to his dormant thoughts in the unconscious) manifested through his prophetic visions, including one providing the spectacle of his own death. Significantly, another crucial site of abjection (highlighted here through death) according to Kristeva (1982) is the corpse, which, along with the maternal body, is an equal source of revulsion and horror.

Paul's final vision is that of the Great War, one that decides the fate of the Dune universe. But fear seems to be a common denominator.

> Paul: That's the future. It is coming.
> Lady Jessica: Paul, you are scared. I can see it. Tell me please, what do you fear?
> Paul: Somebody help me, please. I see a holy war spreading the universe like an unquenchable fire. A war in my name…
> Lady Jessica: You are your father's son. You are my son. You are Duke Paul Atreides. You know who you are.
> Paul: Get off me—You did this to me. Your Bene Gesserit made me a freak!

To borrow a thought in this context from Mack's (2011) *Voice Lessons: The Seductive Appeal of Vocal Control* in Frank Herbert's *Dune*:

> As if drawing directly from Kristeva's notion of the semiotic, Herbert constructs the Voice in *Dune* as a quality unique to women and motherhood… In this way, the taught Voice becomes a crucial link between Jessica and Paul, between mother and child, within the narrative. Jessica's training, of which the Voice is a central aspect, functions like the maternal chora to structure Paul's subjectivity. (Mack, 2011, p. 48)

That the Bene Gesserit sisterhood and his own mother used the Voice for subordination and control remained a constant source of turmoil for Paul in his journey of initiation and maturation. Paul Atreides and his hostile relationship with his M-Other is the key highlight of this study; using analogies from psychoanalytic studies, it attempts to argue how young Paul is introduced into the symbolic order through the power of language. Under Lady Jessica's tutelage, Paul is colonised into a certain role-playing, his destiny is manufactured, and his training is completed only with the use of semantics. As in any colonial encounter, the key to hegemony is language; this cinematic adaptation makes it evident how the foreignness of language is translated into subservience and control through its users, for example, the Voice, which uses intonations to command and order. During this coming-of-age phase, Paul's Hamletian dilemma shifts between this rare sense of trust and proximity with his mother, while on other occasions, a kind of mistrust and rivalry with her, instead of replacing the father, Paul eventually desires to replace the mother to assume supreme leadership (as the One).

Beware of heroes, much better rely on your own judgement, and your own mistakes: Paul Atreides, a false prophet?

The above reflection comes from the author George Herbert himself, whose philosophy behind the conception of the *Dune Chronicles* was the very menace of demagoguery. Though Herbert's work created a lot of stir for its orientalist assumptions, romanticising the Arab world and its Islamist traditions was actually a well-researched project for the author. The real agenda of Herbert's *Dune* was directed against the threatening emergence of false leadership surrounding the environmental crisis. The *Dune*, as a science fiction cocoons at its core a blatant political commentary. Much of Paul's ascent is at odds with democratic rule; thus, the adaptation is largely founded on questioning of leadership and authority. In his work, *The Law of Frank Herbert's Dune: Legal Culture between Cynicism, Earnestness and Futility* Baade (2023) opines, '*Dune* reflects a profound distrust of organised authority. Ultimately, it undervalues the fact that law can serve to prevent abuse of power. But to do so, the law needs independent guardians which are conspicuously absent in Dune' (p. 247).

Zamfir (2024), in his Identity, Politics, and the Postmodern Hero in Frank Herbert's Dune and Dune Messiah, states that Paul's 'journey reveals the fragility of identity and the limitations of agency. Through the lens of Lacan's theoretical framework, Paul's shifting roles underscore the alienation inherent in constructing an identity shaped by collective fantasy and systemic forces' (p. 32). This research study argues that Paul Atreides is an accidental hero; his future destiny as the chosen one is engineered to serve the interests of the Bene Gesserit sisterhood and his mother, Lady Jessica. Paul has hardly any free will, and his trajectory to the leadership of the Dune universe is constructed through gradual disciplining and training under his mother, Lady Jessica, a sister of the Bene Gesserit sisterhood, one complicit with the same political scheme. Zamfir (2024) further elaborates:

> Both Herbert's fictional universe and the modern political landscape reveal how systemic crises, cultural grief and collective fantasies converge to produce figures who embody the hopes and fears of the people. Both Paul and modern populist leaders are products of systemic distrust. Paul benefits from a pre-existing web of religious myths, while populist leaders thrive in environments where distrust in political institutions is at an all-time high … In postmodern fashion, Paul Atreides can be interpreted as a decentred subject. Even though he is the protagonist of the story and thus the focal point of *Dune*, he is powerless against his own 'heroic' abilities. His prescient abilities—the way in which he dreams about the future and the multitude of outcomes that can alter and shape not only his fate but the fate of millions of people around him—make him powerless against the grander socio-political landscape that he inhabits. Paul's journey reveals the paradoxical nature of knowledge, as pre-established notions of the future become methods of imprisonment. (Zamfir, 2024, p. 33)

In this particular context, Paul's intentions are conflicted, which resulted in the total fragmentation and alienation of his self. To borrow another observation from Zamfir (2024):

> Paul's prescience dismantles the illusion of autonomy. Unlike the traditional hero who exercises free will to shape their destiny and even the world around him, Paul's journey is marked by the collapse of certainty. The world is shaping Paul Atreides even before his birth. Everything that has happened in the world and at the time Paul was a member of the world of *Dune* already established how the protagonist was going to act and how his identity would become. His foresight does not liberate him but instead entraps him within a deterministic universe governed by the intersecting systems of the Bene Gesserit's breeding program, the Fremen's religious mythology, and the ecological significance of spice production on Arrakis…Through Paul's journey, Herbert crafts a narrative that reveals the fracturing of identity and the traumatic consequences of fulfilling roles imposed by cultural, religious, and political systems. (Zamfir, 2024, p. 34)

This study provides the psychoanalytic vantage point from where the character of Paul Atreides is examined; the evaluation exposes the dark crevices of his unconscious where the repressed finds its way through the spectacular visions of doom and apocalypse that the young duke is visited by. As Lisan-Al-Gaib, Paul serves not only as a project for the Bene Gesserit or his own mother, but also for the Fremen, whose communal fantasy of emancipation attempts to find its fruition through him as some sort of a coping mechanism. The Lacanian concept of desire can also illuminate Paul's inner turmoil and his predicament. As Zamfir (2024) points out:

> The role of fantasy is a crucial aspect of Lacanian theory, particularly in understanding how individuals navigate the complexities of desire and subjectivity. Fantasy serves as a crucial mechanism through which individuals attempt to manage the inherent tensions and contradictions of the human condition, including the encounter with the Real and the pursuit of the objet petit a. Thus, fantasy, according to Lacan, serves as a mechanism to mediate the tensions between the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. It provides a framework through which individuals attempt to manage their desires and make sense of their place in the world. However, this fantasy ultimately collapses under the weight of the Real, exposing the void that underlies their constructed identities. The Real is not the void that lies at the bottom of the unconscious, it is the realization that there may be nothing there to begin with, thus the impossibility of crafting a narrative surrounding an individual or a nation… For the Fremen, Paul embodies their collective fantasy of liberation – a figure who symbolizes their resistance to the Harkonnens and the one who 'would point the way' to a paradise, forever altering the planet they inhabit. However, this fantasy ultimately collapses under the weight of its contradictions. (Zamfir, 2024, p. 37)

Herbert himself provides a critique of messianism through the shifting identities, fragmented selfhood and dismantled agency of Paul Atreides while chronicling the *Dune* saga (and it finds a similar treatment in the cinematic adaptation as well). To consolidate Herbert's worldview, let me include a reflection from Monfared (2024) from his research article *The Vicious Cycle of Colonization in the Cinematic Adaptations of Dune*:

> It is worth noting that it is an outsider that has been portrayed as the awaited Messiah; therefore, a colonizer, or a possible oppressor, has been endowed with divine power by the colonial discourse as a means of granting him the permission to do whatever he wants. (Monfared, 2024, p. 159)

To carry forward the same line of argument, in *The Messiah and the Greens: The Shape of Environmental Action in Dune and Pacific Edge*, Stratton (2001) states that Paul Atreides is the most 'ambivalent hero of Science Fiction and the source of his tragic nature is in "his awareness of the inevitability of his role"' (p. 308).

Paul's entry into the symbolic order, where his preparation for leadership (his role as Messiah) is initiated under the aegis of his mother, Lady Jessica, and her linguistic training, resonates accurately with Lacan's theoretical proposition about the symbolic, the real and the idea of desire. In this context, Ghoshal (2025) in his *The Silence of the Colonized Cosmos: Trauma and Epistemic Resistance in Frank Herbert's Dune and Denis Villeneuves Cinematic Adaptations* observes, 'The hero Paul Atreides enters this masterfully crafted universe of calculated sound and intentioned silence as a character who is himself the quintessential contradictions of the colonial experience—both occupier and occupied, colonizer and colonized, savior and destroyer' (p. 126). Though the authority of the mother is initially intimidating for the son, eventually Paul discovers the absence/lack/difference as an element of abject and alterity in his own self. This encounter with the M-Other helps him acknowledge his own contentious relation with Lady Jessica. Hence, the object of abject oscillates between his own self and the M-Other. At the peak of this apogee, Paul overcomes his Hamletian dilemma to feel the desire to replace his mother (both claimed as the chosen one, but only one is destined to succeed). As an incidental hero/Messiah whose fate is cosmetically designed, Paul Atreides is thus a figure polarised by opposing claims, causing his Hamletian stance.

Let us conclude with yet another minor but intriguing aspect of Paul's character (as the chosen one) which is his weird 'trans-ness', his access to female consciousness (due to his proximity and training with Bene Gesserit sisterhood and his own mother) that makes him a liminal, hybrid figure, queerly positioned between the gender binary, but this again, is a different subject and falls outside the argument of this research study.

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Article

The Platformisation of Performance Traditions: Archiving Nachni Performances on Digital Platforms and the Parallel Economy of YouTubers in Purulia, West Bengal

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Abstract

This article explores the parallel economy of YouTubers in Purulia, West Bengal, which has emerged alongside the platformisation of the nachni performance tradition. An internet revolution unfolded in rural India following Jio's introduction of cheap data packs in 2016, alongside the increasing availability of low-budget smartphones with cameras and access to video-browsing applications such as YouTube. In the years that followed, young men in Purulia began engaging with the internet and embarked on their journeys as content creators. Their motivation was to record, edit and upload videos of nachni performances, along with other 'folk' traditions of Purulia, to preserve the region's cultural heritage. However, this motivation was not merely archival but was also driven by aspirations for alternative digital careers in a space previously monopolised by urban, educated actors. Based on ethnographic research among the nachnis and the YouTubers, who travel with them to local night-time performances, this article examines how village YouTubers, as part of the platform economy, mediate cultural heritage through the framework of gaze, digital labour and vernacular aesthetics.

Keywords

Nachni, performance, YouTube, platform economy, platformisation, vernacular aesthetics

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Introduction

As I waited under the Sal tree on a secluded green field in Majerdhi village, with Rasik Jagadish and his nachni, Tara Debi, a blue Hero Honda Splendour drove in. The first thing that caught my eye was the 'Sundari Purulia Jhumur' sticker on the front fork of the motorcycle, along with the YouTube logo and an image of Goddess Manasa.[1] The motorcyclist introduced himself as Ganesh Chandra Pramanik, the proud owner of the YouTube channel—'Sundari Purulia Jhumur'. Jagadish had arranged for me to interview Ganesh in a single room on the field, where some musicians from the *Baul*[2] and *Jhumur*[3] musical traditions meet regularly in the evenings to 'jam'. Ganesh is one such musician from their group who is a professional *Jhumur* singer. However, since 2020, he has added another identity to his portfolio, that of a YouTuber documenting and circulating the cultural world he has been a part of since childhood. Ganesh's channel boasts 36,300 subscribers and 593 videos uploaded over the last 5 years. He told me that they would regularly practice and jam in the *baithak* of a musician's home—*amra baithak e program kortam* (we performed jhumur in the baithak)—also known as *baithak jhumur*[4]—when Yudhishthir babu, the poet or *kabi* in the group, suggested that Ganesh, a relatively younger musician in the group, record the practice sessions and upload them on YouTube. Programmes were fewer in number at the time due to the pandemic. The purpose of starting the channel was to archive *nachni naach* and *jhumur*, but the bigger concerns were marketing and promoting themselves to gain popularity, increase bookings and improve livelihoods. The first time I had witnessed a nachni performance was also on YouTube. The thumbnail of the video boasted of bright colours clashing in the background, bold fonts layered unevenly and the nachni's image placed in the middle holding the microphone. The video was 11 min long and comprised a *Jhumur* song named *pothe ghate dekha hole, bolbi mukhe kotha* (if we meet on the road or by the riverbank/ghat, speak with me). The video had over 70,000 views, underscoring the performances' immense popularity. It was intriguing to observe how a 5-h-long all-night performance was broken into several songs, each a few minutes long, and circulated on YouTube via smartphone video recordings of average quality resolution. An internet revolution unfolded in rural India following the introduction of cheap data packs by Jio in 2016, alongside the increasing availability of low-budget smartphones with cameras and access to video-browsing applications, such as YouTube. In the years that followed, young men in Purulia began engaging with the internet and embarked on their journeys as content creators. Their motivation was to record, edit and upload videos of nachni performances, along with other 'folk' traditions of Purulia, to preserve the region's cultural heritage. However, this motivation was not solely archival but was also driven by aspirations for alternative digital careers in a space previously monopolised by urban, educated actors.

Existing scholarship on digital media practices in the peripheries (rural settings, towns and non-metropolitan contexts) lays the groundwork for the ongoing emergence of vernacular cultures. The discussion can be traced to the rise of regional film industries such as Bhojpuri films (Kumar, 2021), Malegaon cinema or Maliwood (Tiwary, 2015), Manbhum cinema (Mukherjee, 2022), Ladakhi and Manipuri films (Kuotsu, 2010) in India as well as transnational cases, such as Nollywood in Nigeria (Haynes, 2007) and Lollywood in Pakistan (Aslam, 2015; Siddiqua, 2025). Tiwary (2015) argues that the Malegaon film industry in Maharashtra, popularly known as Maliwood, known for its spoof of Bollywood and Hollywood films, was a platform for local creativity. Responding to the region's dire socio-economic conditions, the industry thrived despite minimal infrastructure and resources. It worked with directors, writers and actors from the region itself, allowing the audience a chance at relatability that mainstream Bombay cinema never could. Similarly, the Manbhum[5] video and film industry in the early 2000s portrayed a vernacular aesthetic that emerged in the margins of Bengal (Mukherjee, 2022). These spaces created by the people of the region offered an opportunity to experiment and create vernacular content in the digital sphere, opening up a realm of 'democratic promise' (Srinivas, 2003). Nollywood, or the Nigerian film industry, also emerged as a response to the economic collapse, social insecurity and the lack of representation of Africa in mainstream Hollywood (Haynes, 2007). With the development of digital media and the internet entering the lives of rural Indians, platforms like TikTok and YouTube gained popularity for their short-form videos (Mazumdar, 2022; Nayaka et al., 2025). These platforms brought visibility to marginalised and geographically peripheral cultures through the rural digital creators. Purulia, as part of Manbhum, already had a rich history of participation in regional media cultures in the form of the Manbhum video industry. YouTubers emerged as the newer intermediaries of this in the rapid digitalisation of the country, including its performance traditions. Purulia's location at the border of West Bengal makes it a melting pot of hybrid cultures and one of the most poverty-stricken districts of the state. The presence of a digital media industry in the region is owing to a demand for local, relatable content and representation that mainstream Bengali cinema, or Tollywood, was unable to include, an escape from drudgery, and the presence of marginalised cultures with hybrid identities living away from the region's core.

With only five young nachnis still actively performing in Purulia, the art seemed on the verge of fading away. Yet, its popularity grew in parallel in the digital space. Initially, it seemed like an attempt to archive the region's cultural heritage. Gradually, it also became clear that what has emerged is a platform economy in which performers and their visibility are increasingly mediated by the YouTuber, YouTube's algorithm, the number of subscribers and the monetisation of the videos. The local audience is no longer the only one watching the nachnis perform; it is now also mediated and circulated through YouTube and Facebook videos. The camera, algorithm and the digital audience have created a new regime of gaze. This brings me to the central question on which this article will shed light: How has nachni's profession led to the creation of a parallel livelihood for YouTubers within the platform economy? The purpose of this study is to examine how the rise of the platform economy in rural areas brings vernacular aesthetics, such as the recordings of nachni performance, into the digital space. This inclusion in the digital sphere not only ensures the archival of a stigmatised vernacular form but also actively restructures the aesthetic value attached to the form alongside the gendered visibility and economic value emphasised by the cultural mediation of YouTubers and the algorithmic logics of the platform. I have tried to elucidate these points through the narratives of the YouTubers I interacted with in Purulia. The creators' narratives give readers insight into the motivations behind becoming YouTubers and into how they train themselves and sustain digital labour, which is intrinsically precarious. This work is intended for scholars interested in media and cultural studies, South Asian studies, digital anthropology, platform economies and the changing patterns of folk traditions in contemporary India. The article is divided into the following sections.

Who Are the Nachnis?: A Social Biography

Nachnis are female 'folk' performers whose origins and present inhabitation are traced to Purulia, one of the 23 districts of West Bengal in eastern India. Sengupta and Narasimhan (2020) describe the nachni as a female folk dancer who performs night-long with her male partner, the rasik, at village melas and festivals held during Shiv Ratri or the onset of Spring. Nachni nach, locally known as *nachni shailya jhumur*, was historically patronised by landlords in the Manbhum region, later known as Purulia. Sengupta and Narasimhan trace the emergence of the form to the 17th century, when the Mallarajas of Vishnupur converted to Vaishnavism, and Vaishnav literature gained popularity in the region, particularly songs centred on Radha–Krishna devotion. Local zamindars and court poets invested economic and cultural capital in nurturing this musical tradition, giving rise to what came to be known as jhumur. Singers, lyricists, composers and dancers performed jhumur in zamindari courts, while rasiks trained performers in music and dance. The nachnis, on the other hand, functioned as court dancers and were often kept as concubines or mistresses by zamindars.

Following the introduction of the Permanent Settlement[6] in the 18th century, and until its abolition in the 19th century, nachnis and rasiks continued to enjoy elite patronage. The subsequent period was marked by attacks from colonial and nationalist social reformers on nautch dancers, leading to a gradual decline in support from the courts. While a few nachnis, such as Sindhubala Debi, who performed in the court of the king of Kashipur, continued to receive patronage, most performers shifted to entertaining village audiences across Purulia. For much of this period, the rasik remained the sole patron and mediator of the nachni's livelihood. From the 2000s onwards, the Government of West Bengal began introducing welfare schemes aimed at improving the living conditions of nachnis, though these initiatives often remain inadequately implemented. In the present, nachnis perform at local village fairs as well as at state-sponsored events. These performance spaces are intrinsically different. At village fairs, nachnis perform through the night for predominantly drunk male audiences; movements are exaggerated and sensuous, costumes brighter and make-up louder to hold the audience's gaze. In contrast, state programmes demand restraint: nachnis sing more, dance less and present themselves as respectable cultural representatives. They constantly struggle with stigma meted out for their cohabitation patterns, caste and profession.

Nachnis cohabit with their rasiks in ‘quasi-conjugal’ relationships marked by long-term companionship but also vulnerability and exploitation. Nachni is not a caste category but a performance identity; the form is variously called *bai nach, nachni nach* or *nachni shailya jhumur*. Performers primarily come from poor, lower-caste backgrounds such as Kalindi, Bauri, Shohish, Murra while rasiks, often Mahato or Karmakar, occupy relatively higher caste positions. Caste hierarchies deeply structure everyday life. Instances of untouchability, exclusion from domestic spaces and intra-nachni caste discrimination emerged repeatedly in conversations, revealing how stigma is both externally imposed and internally reproduced. Entry into the profession usually occurs in adolescence, when a rasik brings a girl into his household and begins training her. There is no formal recruitment; training unfolds through intimacy, cohabitation and labour. This training encompasses not only singing and dancing but also the cultivation of public femininity and respectability. Nachnis perform with male musician groups known as *nachni* or *bai parties*. Their comprising sequined sarees, belt, garland and jewellery individually curated to attract audience attention. While nachnis are revered as custodians of jhumur, their caste-marked bodies, public visibility, non-marital domestic arrangements and lack of codified performance norms continue to render them objects of enduring stigma. While the number of nachni performances is dwindling amid the growing popularity of other forms of entertainment easily accessible on mobile phones, a few young men in Purulia have taken responsibility for archiving and reviving the performance tradition through digitalisation.

Fieldwork Across Performance and Platform

This article is based on fieldwork conducted in the Purulia district of West Bengal from December 2022 to December 2024, spread over 11 months. The region is located in the north-western part of the state. Bhattacharya (2014) writes that Purulia is renowned for hosting various marginalised populations and for its linguistic, cultural and ethnic diversity. For example, the majority of people in the district belong to various backward communities, such as Mahato, Bagdi, Mali, Sahis and Domhad; Adivasis include Santhals, Bhumij, Karmali, Munda, Ho, Parhaiy, Shabar, Birhor, Kharia, Bedia and Bede. The nachnis comprise a heterogeneous community with surnames like Mahato, Kalindi, Sohish and Bauri while the rasiks are usually from relatively upper castes such as Mahato and Karmakar. The YouTubers I interacted with held positions similar to those of the rasiks. The region is also marked by extreme poverty, with agriculture as the primary means of subsistence. Nachni performances are mainly limited to the district, barring a few that take place in the neighbouring state of Jharkhand. My fieldwork amongst the nachnis involved not only travelling with nachnis during their performances but also engaging with them in their everyday lives, observing their relationships with rasiks, audiences, patrons, state institutions and the digital world of YouTubers. It was at one such late-night performance where I met one of the first YouTubers I interviewed—Lakkhikanta Mahato. Thereafter, using snowball sampling, I was able to contact and eventually meet with four more YouTubers, all spread out across the various blocks of Purulia. Interactions with the YouTubers occurred in different places as and when the opportunity arose. While planned semi-structured interviews were held with all five respondents, I also learned much about their lives as YouTubers and content creators through informal conversations during nachni performances. The conversations and interviews were centred around their life stories, the motivation behind creating a YouTube channel, their technical training in recording and editing videos and their aspirations as digital labourers. Apart from primary data collection, this article also engages with secondary data collected by extensively studying YouTube channels started by young men (no women) in Purulia. I came across 18 YouTube channels that regularly posted content about Purulia's performances. Three of these channels solely posted nachni videos while the rest were a mixture of art forms like Chhau, Sohrai music, Jatra pala, Ahira geet, Jhumur songs, Nartaki dance, Kurmali songs and others. Most of these channels were launched in 2016 and 2017, indicating the period when affordable smartphones became popular in rural India, alongside increased mobile data access following Jio's launch in 2016. Given the proliferation of YouTube videos of nachnis, I began studying the various characteristics of these videos, such as the number of subscribers, likes, comment nature, thumbnails, cover pictures and textual motifs. Thus, digital ethnography and analysis have partially guided my work with the nachnis and the YouTubers of Purulia.

Platformisation and Parallel Livelihoods

I first met Lakkhikanta at one of Postobala's programmes. While I knew all the musicians at the party, this was a new face. I observed him helping Bapon da[7] and Sailesh da tune the harmonium backstage. Soon enough, he took out a tripod stand from his backpack and began searching for a suitable place to set it up. That was when Postobala told me, *o YouTube e amader video chare* (he uploads our videos on YouTube). As the performance began, I observed Lakkhi da remain stationed near the tripod, zooming in and out, attaching his smartphone to a power bank when it ran out of charge and singing along to the jhumur that Postobala performed. Lakkhi da later informed me that there is no monetary exchange between the performers and the YouTuber. He explained that through his videos, performers gain visibility on social media, leading committees to book them for shows and their popularity to grow. The bai[8] party only asks him to mention their contact number in the caption for future bookings. Over several conversations in the following months, Lakkhi da shared how he began his journey as a YouTuber, his earlier profession, his earnings and his concerns about sustaining this livelihood as nachni performances diminished. His narrative revealed how nachni performances have enabled the growth of a parallel economy, making the two mutually dependent. This marks a moment where traditional performance economies intersect with the digital logics of platform economies, leading to the platformisation of cultural practices.

Helmond (2015) defines platformisation as the interaction between platforms and cultural producers. It refers to the 'penetration of digital platforms … economic, infrastructural, and governmental extensions into the cultural industries, and the organisation of cultural practices of labour, creativity, and democracy around these platforms' (Poell et al., 2022, p. 5). Social media platforms like YouTube operate as institutions that offer 'frictionless entry' and enable users to participate easily in value creation (Parker et al., 2016, p. 25). Such platforms create 'multisided markets' connecting users with institutions and businesses (Evans & Schmalensee, 2016). However, like other labour markets, platform economies are marked by precarity and inequalities based on gender, caste, race and ethnicity. While this project focuses on cultural producers, the term 'prosumer' (Toffler, 1980) complicates this category. The term enmeshes the characteristics of a producer and a consumer. Cultural producers (YouTubers), like Lakkhikanta, Ganesh and Dipak, are also consumers of YouTube content. All three learned recording, editing and uploading through DIY (Do It Yourself) videos on the platform, enabling an 'informal mentorship' (Chau, 2011, p. 69). Chau (2011, p. 68) attributes YouTube's popularity to its intuitive interface and instructional content, which allowed self-taught creators from Purulia to experiment within the digital space. With portable smart devices, internet access became easier in villages across Purulia. Rural youth began exploring digital platforms and aspiring towards careers that seemed achievable with smartphones and social media applications. Mazumdar (2022) argues that India's platform economy grew through the localisation of global platforms like YouTube and Facebook. Unlike linear technological transitions in the Global North, India and China witnessed accelerated adoption of the internet and smartphones (Flitsch, 2008; Nayaka & Reddy, 2022), bringing rural populations into the digital fold. Platforms like YouTube and TikTok became spaces for expressing creativity, understood here as 'everyday cultural production' linked to access, literacy and self-representation (Mazumdar, 2022, p. 343).

Optimistic narratives frame platform creativity as 'voluntary work' and 'productive leisure' (Burgess, 2006), while political–economic critiques highlight its precarity and unpaid nature (Casilli, 2017; Dyer-Witheford, 2015; Huws, 2014). Bainotti (2025, p. 33) notes that small creators often work under opaque conditions and continue free labour in the hope of future stability, leading to 'composite careers', that is, a number of simultaneous professions or careers. Lakkhikanta migrated to Benaras in 2007 and worked in bakery factories before returning to Purulia. In 2017, while still employed, he purchased a Vivo smartphone, began recording nachni performances and started his channel *Rukhamati*. After monetisation in 2018, he left his factory job, though he continues to farm. He earns between ₹10,000 and ₹12,000 per month from YouTube. Another YouTuber, Dipak Kumar Mahato, a BSc Agriculture graduate, works as an agriculturist in Purulia and has earned approximately 22 lakhs through YouTube. Unlike Lakkhikanta, YouTube remains a passion project for Dipak. Both thus sustain composite careers, combining digital labour with agriculture. Such creators collectively sustain, formalise and professionalise their DIY vernacular media practices (Nayaka et al., 2025, p. 186). The media practices of YouTubers in Purulia resemble an informal startup culture marked by creativity, experimentation, flexibility and entrepreneurship. Gupta (2024) situates this within 'experimental times', where work, social life and identities are shaped through everyday experimentation. This infrastructure of precarity, anxiety and hope promises pleasurable and creative work while demanding continuous engagement. Lakkhi da emphasised that he no longer reports to a boss and can take breaks, though he must continue to make regular uploads to satisfy the algorithm. He continues to upskill in filming, editing and monetisation, waiting for virality and recognition. As Poell et al. (2022) note, low entry barriers produce speculative hope alongside precarity. The convergence of platformisation, informal startup culture and digital labour thus reorganises rural economies, producing parallel livelihoods alongside the performance economy that has long sustained Purulia's cultural life.

Digital Labour and the YouTube Gaze

Ganesh Chandra Pramanik, the owner of the 'Sundari Purulia Jhumur' channel has built a network over the years, comprising performers from nachni parties as well as other YouTubers. Ganesh also keeps a tiny notebook in which he records the dates of performances as and when he learns about them. He is part of a WhatsApp group of YouTubers in the region, where the programme organisers share information, in the form of pamphlets, about upcoming local programmes. As I sat through the night observing Jyotsna Debi, a nachni from Kantardih, I also watched Ganesh's movements. While the musicians tuned their instruments, Ganesh unfolded the tripod stand and positioned it on the ground, adjusting its legs to dig into the uneven soil. There is no front or back side of the stage, since the nachni performs in circles, showing herself to every member of the audience seated in a circle around the *ashor*.[9] Hence, the tripod's position is determined by available space and the area with fewer people. Ganesh then wiped the lens of his phone with the *gamcha*[10] wrapped around his neck, checked the battery level and set the phone on the stand, adjusting the frame to capture the dancer and her surroundings for the next 5 h till dawn. He fixed the frame for the time being but kept zooming in and out throughout the performance to capture specific movements and gestures with greater focus. Ganesh also seemed to be acquainted not only with the nachni and the musicians but also with the program organisers, since he had been to the same venue several times to record performances of other nachnis. The nachni and the musicians share this workspace with Ganesh and other YouTubers. While the nachni's labour is embodied in her gestures, movements and singing, the YouTuber's labour is embodied in media technologies and platforms. This mediated labour is performed, circulated and valued through technological intermediaries such as cameras, algorithms, screens and a digital audience.

Bhattacharyya (2022) argues that 'with changes in the communications landscape, what is also changing is the way information is being recorded, preserved and transmitted' (p. 2). With the advent of platforms under web 2.0, such as YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and so on, there has not only been a democratisation of information dissemination, but for various marginalised sections of society, it has offered an opportunity for archiving their stories, everyday experience, art, performance and other aspects of life. In Purulia, the nachnis have gained popularity through their growing presence on social media, and a few men from the region who grew up watching these performances have joined the digital labour force as content creators by recording, editing and uploading nachnis and other performances unique to the district. Digital labour falls under the purview of immaterial labour, which comprises immaterial products such as information, social relations and knowledge (Hardt & Negri, 2004). Fuchs and Sevignani (2013) conceptualise digital labour as the creation of content that builds relationships with consumers, the commodification and surveillance of users' data, targeted advertisements based on user activity and the organisation and flow of information through algorithms. Williams (1980) describes communication media as means of production—'indispensable elements both of the productive forces and the relations of production' (p. 50). However, he does not address the practices of subjects within this process or the question of whether communication itself constitutes 'a form of work' (Fuchs & Sevignani, 2013, p. 251). The YouTubers of Purulia associate their labour with the labour of the nachni and have attempted to monetise the performance, but it is more than a question of livelihood. Labour and livelihood in this case are intricately intertwined with nostalgia, pride in one's culture and region, the desire to earn by commodifying crucial parts of one's life and sharing them with a global audience, and, as already argued, archiving a dance that is dying. The YouTuber's gaze is guided by these factors, which are intermeshed in the digital labour process. The labour is further mediated by the algorithmic gaze of YouTube and the audience gaze as well. The algorithmic gaze transforms the YouTuber's affective gaze of nostalgia and local identity into data and content that can be monetised. The nachni, on the other hand, performs in tandem with both the YouTuber's gaze and the algorithmic gaze as she looks back at the camera, which archives and commodifies her. What has emerged is a triad of gazes: the nachni, the YouTuber and the YouTube algorithm. The platformisation of nachni performance also reproduces gendered hierarchies of labour. While nachnis continue to perform and embody the spectacle, it is predominantly young men who occupy the role of digital mediators—recording, editing and monetising their performances on YouTube. This shift carries the patriarchal gaze and the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975) of the *ashor* to the digital space where men retain control over the technologies of circulation and visibility. At the same time, women remain the visible bodies upon which attention and profit depend.

YouTube's algorithmic gaze is also guided by the digital audience gaze that views, likes and comments on the nachni videos. The likes on these videos range from 1,000 to 80,000, and the comment section usually has 20–30 comments, depending on the YouTuber's popularity. I will discuss a few comments from five nachni videos uploaded by three different channels—Rukhamati, Aamar Sundari Manbhum and Sundari Purulia. I have divided these comments into a few categories thematically, like appreciative comments, derogatory comments and moralistic comments. The majority of comments can be grouped into the appreciative category, in which viewers use one-word adjectives such as *shundor* (beautiful) and *chomotkar* (amazing). There are also longer comments like 'দারুণ দিদি খুব সুন্দর গান। তোমরা তো পুরুলিয়া লোক সংস্কৃতি বাঁচিয়ে রেখেছো।' (Amazing Didi. Very beautiful song. You have kept the folk culture of Purulia alive). This comment considers nachni performance a crucial part of the 'folk' culture of Purulia and believes that contemporary performers have kept the tradition alive. Another similar comment was made in a video of a popular nachni, Pabita Kalindi. It said,

'প্রণাম ।। বাঁচাও রাখ মানভূমের মান' (*Pranam*. Keep the pride of Manbhum alive). This viewer views the nachni's art as the pride of Manbhum. Certain comments seem appreciative at the outset, but it is difficult to understand purely from the text what the commentator meant. Examples of such comments are—*Khub sundor aami tuma ke bhalo bashi* (very beautiful I love you) and 'ইনার ফোন নম্বর টা থাকলে কেউ জানাবেন প্লিজ।' (please let me know if someone has her phone number). The latter can have two meanings. The commentator, who from the display picture seems to be a man, might have asked for nachni's phone number to book her for a performance, even though the number is always mentioned in the description box by the YouTuber. However, we can also interpret the text to mean that the man is asking for the nachni's contact due to other reasons since nachnis have often also been associated with sex work. Another comment that I believe can fall into the appreciative category is 'কবি গোলক দাদা সাথে যোগাযোগ করাতে পারেন?' (Can you help me get in touch with poet Golok Dada?). This comment was with reference to the video of Bijali Debi, wherein she sang a jhumur song written by Golok Mahato. The YouTuber, Lakkhikanta Mahato, responded to this comment saying '7908****** এই নাম্বারে যোগাযোগ করুন' (7908****** you may contact him on this number). Unlike the appreciative comments that are present in quite a large number, where viewers take pride in the nachni's performance tradition and art despite its stigmatisation, there are also a few derogatory and moralistic comments that caught my eye. One such comment was '*a gulo ki*', which literally translates to 'what are these'. However, when said in a certain tone or context (like under a nachni video), it carries a disapproving, dismissive or moralising connotation—something like 'What on earth is this?' Another similar derogatory comment was 'এ কেমন ঝুমুর বিক্রিত করতে করতে যা তা অবস্থা জীবনের করেছে', which translates to 'What kind of jhumur is this? By commercialising it, they have turned life into a complete mess'. This is a comment that many in Purulia will resonate with, that the style of performance of the nachni has destroyed the authentic jhumur. Other similar comments are, *Ganer sur bhalo, kintu bhasa suddhi karte habe* (the voice of the performer is good, but the language needs to be purified). Thus, the digital audience also includes self-proclaimed 'experts' of the art whose gaze is evaluative and moralising, often policing what they perceive as deviations from the 'authentic' form of jhumur. The comments, thus, reveal the various kinds of gaze with which the digital audience views the nachni. These gazes are often conflicting in nature. They range from a sense of nostalgia and pride in one's local roots and culture to moral judgment and aesthetic critique. The YouTube gaze is anonymous and fragmented, unlike the gaze of the live audience. Yet, this gaze continues to regulate the visibility of the nachni in the digital space.

The YouTubers of Purulia as Cultural Mediators

Founded in 2005 by three PayPal employees and acquired by Google 2 years later (Arthurs et al., 2018), YouTube has grown into one of the most significant repositories of popular culture. The platform hosts a wide range of content genres, including shopping, music, films and live videos. Over time, YouTube has emerged as a site of vernacular creativity in several countries, including India. Prior to the platform's rise, media production in India relied on 'accessible, low-cost, portable media technologies to produce, circulate and consume media content' (Nayaka et al., 2025, p. 187). India has long sustained a thriving low-cost media economy dependent on informal circuits and piracy, exemplified by industries such as Malegaon cinema, Mewati videos, Bhojpuri music videos and Manbhum videos. While grassroots media cultures have always existed, digital platforms like YouTube, Facebook and TikTok have increasingly formalised the production, circulation and consumption of cultural content (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). YouTube has, thus, enabled subcultures to thrive 'within the binaries of precarity and creativity, the global and the local, as well as the professional and amateur' (Kumar, 2016, p. 5608). Despite this precarity, the platform has given rise to several YouTubers in Purulia's rural hinterlands. I interacted with three such creators—Ganesh Chandra Pramanik, Lakkhikanta Mahato and Deepak Kumar Mahato. 'I wanted to preserve the tradition or legacy of Purulia', Lakkhikanta Mahato told me when I asked why he travelled night after night to record nachni performances.

Lakkhikanta began his channel in 2017, coinciding with the arrival of Jio's telecom services in his village, Sukurkuti, located around 10 km from Dhatkidi. The launch of cheap data packs led to a rapid rise in smartphone usage across India (Sengupta, 2017). Lakkhikanta recalled the excitement of accessing the internet for the first time on his mobile phone. Searching online for jhumur and nachni performances, he found little content available. This absence prompted him to digitise and upload songs from CDs and DVDs sourced from computer centres and cyber cafés, often accompanied by still images. As his videos garnered significant views, YouTube approached him for monetisation in 2018. When asked how he learnt to navigate the platform and keep pace with technological changes, he stated that YouTube itself was his teacher, workspace and source of income. Educated only up to the 10th grade, Lakkhi da had grown up watching jhumur performances and nachnis, such as Postobala, Butan, Balika and Bimala, often sneaking out as a child to attend night-long performances. He described jhumur as a form that, while unable to transform life circumstances, refreshed the mind and offered temporary relief from sadness—an affective pull that kept audiences at the *ashor* through the night. Lakkhi da's YouTube channel, *Rukhamati*, currently has over 50.5k subscribers and thousands of views per upload. The channel description states: 'This channel Published. Jhumar Music Song & Chhoudance and more Purulia Addibashi cultural Video song', urging viewers to subscribe for updates. While the description does not explicitly mention nachnis, the channel's cover image prominently features performers such as Postobala, Bijola, Pabita and Sheila. Text on the banner reads 'Purulia Nachni nach, jhumur gaan, music channel', followed by contact details. Through these textual and visual motifs, the channel positions itself as a platform for promoting and preserving *adibashi*, or indigenous culture.

I argue that YouTubers like Lakkhikanta function as cultural mediators who translate the embodied, local performance traditions of the nachnis into content consumable by a broader digital audience. The strategic use of terms such as *adibashi* appears to engage the platform's algorithm, equating Purulia's culture with indigeneity. Two other channels included in this analysis—*Aamar Sundari Manbhum* and *Aamar Sundari Purulia*—employ similar language, using terms like *oitijjho* (tradition and heritage) and culture. The invocation of such terms is deeply tied to Purulia's sociocultural history and its long association with Santhal and other *adivasi* communities. Scholars across anthropology and cultural studies argue that tradition is actively curated and mobilised to assert identity and legitimacy. *Oitijjho*, in this sense, is an active claim rather than a passive inheritance (Williams, 1977). Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) argue that traditions are often 'invented' to establish authority, continuity and cultural coherence, particularly where identities and resources are contested. Following this argument, YouTubers in Purulia can be seen as participants in a broader cultural project that curates nachni performances as symbols of regional pride in a district historically marked as backward. *Oitijjho* here becomes a strategy for both belonging to and differentiating from the national cultural framework (Hall, 1990). The YouTuber curates elements of the nachni performance, a performance that is ephemeral. The YouTuber must adhere to the decreasing attention span of his digital viewers and upload edited parts of the entire 4–5 h-long stint, which the live audience sits patiently through, rather than enjoying themselves. I use the term 'cultural mediator' for the village YouTuber since he carefully selects the parts of the performance most polished and clear in his recordings, reinterprets them and attempts to legitimise a stigmatised performance style using categories like 'indigenous', 'heritage' and 'tradition'. After the night's performance, Lakkhikanta returns to his village on his motorcycle in the early hours of the morning. While the rest of the morning is spent getting some rest, he soon begins the other half of his work, that is, editing the raw recordings. Lakkhikanta told me that he has to sit through the entire footage and scout for parts of the recordings that have the clearest audio and video with minimal disruptions by the audience, programme organisers, children running around, a sudden halt due to a scuffle between drunk men, the nachni taking a break due to the immense exhaustion of continuously dancing and singing, the hawkers shouting over each other's voices to invite customers and so on. While all these 'disruptions' embody the ephemerality of the nachni performance, YouTubers make efforts to cut them out in an effort to meet a standardised sense of aesthetics seen in the digital space, which they believe disruptions will hinder. Continuity is considered more palatable than disruptions, much like a classical dance recital on the proscenium. YouTubers as cultural mediators wish to popularise the nachni art and save this *oitijjho* from complete erasure. Many of the YouTubers like Ganesh are musicians and artists themselves and, hence, members of the community they are culturally mediating. Yet, the politics of cultural mediation becomes a point of contention that must not be overlooked, especially as we try to understand the nature of mediation and how it contributes to nachni's performance repertoire as a continuum. The performance has never been static; it is always in a state of 'becoming'. Its recording and presence in the digital sphere are a part of this continuum. Dietze (2018) contends that 'cultural mediators do not merely operate between different cultures, but that they also engage in a diversity of spatial arrangements and carve out arenas of action in which new cultural practices and boundaries are produced'. They act as a mode of communication between different parties and contexts. With its long history of colonial occupation, cultural mediators in contemporary times play a complex role in society, going beyond the binaries of coloniser/colonised and oppressor/oppressed. They facilitate 'cultural encounters' (Bentley, 1993). 'Mediation does not merely mean transporting something from sender to receiver, or from one culture to another; it also includes actively shaping and redirecting the transaction' (Dietze, 2018). The interaction between the triad—the cultural mediator, in this case, the YouTuber, the content, that is, the nachni performance, and the digital platform, that is, YouTube, can transform the substance which is mediated (Mersch, 2016). What happens to ephemerality then? Does the performance change when delivered digitally? The nachni's space of performance has always been confined to the *ashor*. The ashor is not limited to the materiality of the stage (in the case of the nachnis, the stage is merely a rug on the ground) but includes the entire scene around the stage. The men in the audience hooting, screaming, shouting out sexual remarks, whistling, dancing and lost in the sensuous connotations of the jhumur or Bhojpuri song the nachni is singing and moving her hips and breasts to. It resonates somewhat with Prakash's description of the environment at an orchestra or *arkestra* performance. He says, 'The scene is sensational. The response is visceral. It is made of vibes, whistles and voices. In the local language, they call it *lahar* (sensation) that sets the arkestra stage on fire' (Prakash, 2023, p. 2). The ashor also includes the musicians who sit around the nachni as guards of her honour, who share jokes amongst themselves and whisper forgotten lyrics to the nachni. The ashor is a charged, affective space. The nachni's body commands the ashor as it leaps, swirls and walks voluptuously, capturing the gaze of the audience. All these elements come together to create the visceral experience of the ashor. I argue the nachni's performance is ephemeral. One has to be present in the moment to not just view the performance but feel it. Cultural mediation in the digital sphere at the outset, takes away this element of ephemerality. However, as already discussed, the performance is also a continuum that cannot be defined in a single way. The digital mediation contributes to the continuum of shaping and reshaping the performance as it moves from the *ashor* to the smartphone screen.

Postcolonial nationalism in India relied on cultural homogeneity, wherein dance and music became sites of moral authority and national identity (Chatterjee, 1993). As Chakravorty (1998) demonstrates classical dance forms such as Bharatanatyam and Odissi were elevated through elite nationalist projects, while other forms were relegated to categories of folk, popular, ritual or stigmatised performance. Performers such as devdasis, tawaifs, tamasha artists, cabaret dancers and nachnis were marked as vulgar and morally suspect, their bodies unsettling nationalist ideals of womanhood. Putcha (2021) identifies this as a failure 'to complete the transition from colonial subject to national citizen' (p. 131). Despite such marginalisation, nachnis have remained culturally popular in Purulia and its neighbouring regions. I argue that YouTubers, like Lakkhi da, Ganesh and Deepak, are instrumental in repositioning nachni performances as *oitijjho*. This cultural form demands recognition and negotiates its place within regional and national hierarchies.

Vernacular Aesthetics

Before the proliferation of YouTube videos, the demand for vernacular, informal and local aesthetics was fulfilled by video industries that had mushroomed across the margins of Indian states and cities, including small districts like Purulia. Mukherjee (2022) writes about 'sub-regional' video productions in the context of the informal video industry located in Purulia district, locally referred to as 'Manbhum videos'. Characterised by song and dance sequences, these productions typically operate on minimal budgets of ₹20,000–₹40,000, employing local talent, locally sourced costumes and on-location shoots, with videos recorded on semi-professional cameras and edited in makeshift studios using free software. The circulation of Manbhum videos began around 2003–2004 and gradually gained popularity. Every month, two to three videos circulated through tea shops, markets and television screens in long-distance buses. However, with the rise of smartphones and YouTube channels in rural areas, the circulation of these videos in their traditional VCD format began to decline. Mukherjee argues that the Manbhum and Purulia regions have historically been politically volatile and culturally marginalised. The stories of the people of this region have often been neglected in dominant Bengali narratives or 'presented as exotic locales' (2022, p. 66). Consequently, Manbhum videos have served as a platform for underrepresented people—administratively classified into various castes and tribes—to present themselves audaciously. Through her analysis of several Manbhum videos, Mukherjee argues that the content and environment of the 'Manbhum terrain' (p. 67) depicted in them are largely absent from mainstream popular cinema, whether Tollywood or Bollywood. Speaking of similar Bhojpuri videos, Tripathy (2007) connects their popularity to aspirations for social mobility and the portrayal of fantasies within vernacular contexts. He suggests that the discontinuities between Bombay cinema and Bhojpuri videos should encourage researchers to explore the relatively understudied terrain of vernacular aesthetics, understood as people carving out a cultural space for themselves after being historically excluded from national discourse. This became evident during my fieldwork when I asked Dipak Mahato, a local YouTuber, 'Who do you think predominantly watches your YouTube videos and comments on them?' He smirked and replied, 'You surely do not think bhadraloks of Kolkata or the Brahmins watch these videos. The performances of our region have never appealed to them unless packaged in a certain manner'. His remark refers to the exoticised packaging through which performances such as Santhal dance or Chhau have often been consumed by the Bengali middle class. Vernacular aesthetics, therefore, existed long before YouTube and even prior to Manbhum videos, although these forms continuously transform and contemporise themselves. I argue that vernacular aesthetics should be understood as lived, embodied and technologically evolving while remaining rooted in sub-regional histories, video production practices and the politics of representation. The low-resolution, improvisational and affective qualities of Manbhum and Bhojpuri videos exemplify a cultural form that privileges familiarity and resonance over polish or technical perfection. With the emergence of digital platforms such as YouTube, this aesthetic has not disappeared; instead, it has found new mediators. The rise of village YouTubers in Purulia marks the latest phase in this vernacular media continuum, where local creators equipped with smartphones and affordable data connectivity reconfigure older vernacular sensibilities within the algorithmic logics of the digital world.

Nayaka et al.'s (2025) recent work on the rise of village YouTubers provides an important contribution to the study of the platformisation of cultural production in the Global South and the creator experiences it entails. Based on fieldwork conducted in Lambadipally village in Telangana—where one of the earliest village-based YouTube channels, MVS, emerged—the authors demonstrate 'how small-town creators have emerged as platform-dependent entrepreneurs and entrepreneur-dependent creators' (2025, p. 189). 'MVS platforms satire, spoof and comedy pieces produced by a set of aspiring village artistes from Lambadipally village (Karimnagar District, Telangana)' (p. 190). What began as a vlog in 2012 evolved into a media collective and eventually a digital media company named Village Show Private Limited with nearly 3 million subscribers and collective labour organised around scriptwriting, shooting and editing. Channels like MVS, as well as others such as the Village Cooking Channel from Tamil Nadu, focus on village life while engaging with broader social themes. Nayaka et al. argue that the digital spaces created by these YouTubers constitute 'vernacular creative publics where the identities of rural communities undergo online construction, curation and circulation' (p. 192). The channel owners informed the researchers that their goal was to represent local culture and lifestyle, particularly in response to urban misconceptions that portray villagers as illiterate, ignorant or culturally inferior. I encountered similar sentiments among the YouTubers I interacted with during fieldwork. They expressed pride in their local traditions and *oitijjho*, which they felt were gradually fading due to the region's marginalised social position. Dipak voiced this concern when he remarked that ordinary artists from Kolkata often receive recognition and fame, while highly skilled performers from Purulia remain forgotten. Vernacular aesthetics can, therefore, be interpreted as a form of resistance that challenges entrenched class and caste hierarchies. While such resistance is not entirely new, platformisation has amplified its possibilities by allowing local creators to share their stories on global platforms. Guha and Kapoor (2021) argue that metropolitan centres have historically maintained hegemony over social media platforms, but the rise of village content creators is beginning to challenge these hierarchies as power structures shift. They note that such content gains popularity through its 'untamed rusticity and realistic portrayal of everyday life devoid of pretence', where minimal editing, homely settings and familiar props create an immediate sense of connection and nostalgia. Social media platforms, such as YouTube and TikTok, have thus contributed to the democratisation of cultural visibility by enabling diverse communities to showcase their everyday lives, traditions and artistic practices while also generating income. The emergence of creators like Lakkhikanta, Dipak and the MVS collective demonstrates how local creators are reclaiming spaces historically dominated by upper-class and upper-caste actors. Their videos challenge aesthetic hierarchies through affective elements such as nostalgia and pride in local culture, resisting the urban gaze that has frequently exoticised or appropriated vernacular creativity. Despite the algorithmic and capitalist structures underlying platform economies, these digital spaces have enabled new modes of self-representation and assertion. Contemporary village YouTubers of Purulia thus carry forward the legacy of the Manbhum video industry, as vernacular aesthetics become mediated through the platform economy, where visibility itself functions as a form of cultural assertion and resistance against caste and class hegemonies.

Conclusion

Purulia has always been known for its performative traditions, such as the more popular Chhau dance and the lesser-known but stigmatised Nachni form. With the internet revolution, the need emerged to archive the nachnis' performances, whose popularity was dwindling. Village YouTubers took this opportunity not only to record and preserve the art in a digital space, but also to create a parallel livelihood for themselves. This article provides an inquiry into the nature of digital labour, the rise of the parallel livelihood of YouTubers in Purulia and how the village YouTubers have emerged as the new cultural mediators in the 'vernacular media continuum'. I argue that vernacular media is not a new phenomenon in Purulia, where the Manbhum video industry once thrived. The YouTubers are an addition to the digital vernacular media, which I understand as a continuum. Observing the nachnis and speaking at length with YouTubers as well as analysing YouTube channels, it became clear that digital platforms like YouTube not only archive a fading performance but give it new meaning and sustain it. The nachni performance, which was once predominantly under the patronage of local zamindars and rasiks, is now being circulated on digital platforms and engaging with digital metrics such as views, likes, subscriptions and comments. The emerging digital dynamics in Purulia resonate with the scholarship on rural digital creators in other parts of India, such as the village YouTubers of Tamil Nadu. In both cases, digital platforms have encouraged and facilitated the visibility of vernacular creative publics beyond core metropolitan centres. However, this article has argued for the platformisation of the distinct trajectory of a stigmatised performance and body of the nachni. Unlike many village YouTubers that create a scripted performance for online viewing, Purulia's YouTubers mediate a pre-existing performance economy in the form that it is presented to the live audience, and yet, only certain elements of the live performance are presented to the digital audience. This cultural mediation of the nachni performance is, thus, politically charged. The YouTuber selects the recordings with the clearest audio and video with minimal disruptions by the audience and others at the *ashor*. Thereafter, they attempt to legitimise a stigmatised performance style by using categories such as 'indigenous', 'heritage' and 'tradition' to attract more viewers by invoking nostalgia, belonging and regional identity. While the ephemerality of the performance is lost in the process of digitalisation, the YouTubers are able to preserve and gain an audience beyond the *ashor* for the almost-extinct nachni performance. They are also able to imagine an alternative life for themselves as digital creators, a new profession filled with precarity but with the scope for mobility, learning valuable skills and an exciting life working for oneself with the flexibility of time and space. Further research in this area can examine how the platformisation of vernacular performance traditions, such as the nachnis, creates new practices of digital gaze and digital labour. While this article focused on the motivations and lives of Purulia's YouTubers and how they have become cultural mediators of the performance in the digital space, it also raises questions about how algorithms and platform metrics shape the circulation of the performance in the digital space. The latter is something I believe must be explored and better understood. This will enable a deeper understanding of the layers of gaze that structure the digital afterlives of the nachnis. Lastly, comparative analysis of other regions of India where similar phenomena might be taking place will become important to understand how rural digital creators negotiate the precarity of digital labour and culturally assert themselves in the platform economy.

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Notes

1. Manasa puja is marked to worship Manasa devi, the protector from snakebites and the Goddess of fertility and health. The puja takes place during the Ashar/Shravan (monsoon) months in the Bengali calendar and is celebrated across Bengal, Jharkhand, Assam and parts of Odisha (Britannica Editors, 2019).
2. Bauls are a community of minstrels from Bengal whose music boasts of elements of Vaishnavism, tantra and Sufism. Their belief go against structures of organised religion, the caste system and focus on the inner divinity of the body (Capwell, 1986).
3. Jhumur is a musical tradition that has emerged out of the Rarh Bengal area or better recognised as the Chotanagpur plateau. The songs are inspired by the eternal love between the Gods, Radha and Krishna. This was enhanced under Vaishnavite influence in the area. Thereafter, local landlords accepted it as their court music and 'darbari jhumur' or 'court jhumur' was born. The tradition is associated with the tribals of the region and has become a part of various folk festivals as well (Chakraborty & Mandal, 2013).

4. Baithak refers to a space right outside the house where men in rural parts of India often gather to chat. Baithak jhumur is an intimate session in which jhumur musicians gather at a patron or poet's home to sing together, accompanied by instruments. This usually takes place within the home or an area (baithak) right outside the inner premises.
5. In 1833, the erstwhile Jangal Mahal district was divided, and a new district, Manbhum, was constituted with headquarters in Manbazar. The district was very large in size and included parts of Bankura, Burdwan of present West Bengal, and Dhanbad, Dhalbhum, Saraikela and Kharsawan of present states of Jharkhand and Odisha. In 1838, the district headquarters were transferred to Purulia. Finally, in 1956, Manbhum district was partitioned between Bihar and West Bengal under the State's Reorganisation Act and the Bihar and West Bengal (Transfer of Territories) Act 1956. The present district of Purulia was born on 1 November 1956. Purulia is still considered to embody the Manbhuiya culture (culture of Manbhum), even though the erstwhile Manbhum no longer exists.
6. The Permanent Settlement of Bengal was a land revenue system enforced by the British East India Company in 1793. It was a system in which zamindars, who were made the hereditary owners of land, had to collect taxes from peasants and pay a fixed revenue to the British (Guha, 1982).
7. Da is a term of endearment used by Bengalis. It is short for 'dada' which translates to elder brother.
8. Nachni party is more popularly called bai party in Purulia. The word 'bai' literally translates to 'woman', and 'party' is a replacement for the word 'group'. '*Bai*' is also used for a '*baiji*' or a courtesan. In recent times, 'baiji' has been used in a derogatory manner to refer to a promiscuous woman. Many nachnis no longer wish to be referred to as bai or baiji since it further stigmatises them.
9. *Ashor* refers to the space of performance of the nachni. It is not a proscenium but a rug placed on the ground on which the nachni performs surrounded by the musicians.
10. *Gamcha* is a lightweight, rectangular, cotton cloth prevalent across eastern and northern regions of India. It comes in a variety of colours and designs. The cloth is used as a towel, a scarf around the neck or head to protect from the sun and even for religious rituals in certain cultures.

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Article

Advancing a People-centric Framework for Repurposing India's Coal Mines

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Abstract

The livelihoods, economies, and landscapes in mining regions are significantly impacted by the closure and transition of coal mines. Recent policy developments in India indicate a shift toward more inclusive post-mining futures. However, community participation is still limited in practice, and decision-support tools continue to favor technical and expert-driven approaches. Building on insights from the existing literature on post-mining land use (PMLU) assessment approaches, this study suggests a three-phase, people-centric PMLU assessment framework intended to bridge the gap between spatial decision analysis and participatory engagement. The approach recommends (a) thorough site and stakeholder assessments to identify community needs; (b) social-ecological system mapping and causal-loop modeling to translate these priorities into possible land-use options; and (c) geographic information systems-multi-criteria decision analysis to assess the spatial suitability of shortlisted options based on expert-derived criteria. It preserves analytical rigor while emphasizing local knowledge and regional social-ecological dynamics to identify technically feasible, environmentally sound, and economically viable PMLUs, which also preserve sociocultural ties to the landscape.

Keywords

Post-mining land use, geographic information systems-multi-criteria decision analysis, spatial decision-support, social-ecological systems

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Introduction

As coal-dependent regions increasingly transition away from fossil fuels, questions about how to responsibly close and transform coal mines have gained considerable attention. India holds an estimated 378.21 billion tons of coal reserves as of April 2023, with Jharkhand, Odisha, and Chhattisgarh accounting for roughly 70% of these resources (Geological Survey of India, 2023). Coal remains central to India's energy matrix, providing over 55% of primary energy and fueling approximately 74% of electricity generation (CEA, 2022), while supporting more than 7 million direct and indirect livelihoods (ILO, 2021). In the face of ambitious climate commitments, including a 47% reduction in emissions intensity by 2035 and net-zero emissions by 2070 (GoI, 2026), India confronts the urgent challenge of phasing out coal mining in a just and sustainable manner.

India's 2025 mine closure guidelines, developed by the Ministry of Coal (MoC), demonstrate a significant interest in the environmental, socio-economic, and community-focused implications of selecting post-mining land uses (PMLUs). They emphasize that mines cannot be abandoned or backfilled alone, but must undergo a deliberate process of reclamation, regeneration, and ultimately repurposing to benefit affected communities (MoC, 2025). These closure stages require technical planning alongside a robust system of criteria and frameworks to assess if a site is environmentally stable, economically feasible, socially acceptable, and technically suitable for future use. Recognizing the multifunctionality of post-mining landscapes, the guidelines promote renewable energy projects, sustainable agriculture, eco-tourism, and social infrastructure development.

Despite having identified 299 mines for closure, only three have been formally closed in the last 16 years, indicating substantial delays that exacerbate social vulnerabilities and slow ecological restoration (CAG, 2023). Indeed, coal mining regions have been transformed into "monoculture societies," and mine closures will not only cause significant unemployment among formal and informal mine workers but also significantly reduce the income of local businesses, force workers' outmigration, and dampen local economic opportunities (Kime et al., 2023; Pai et al., 2026).

In this perspective, we speak to several considerations and challenges pertaining to effectively repurposing mines within the Indian context. First, we highlight the relative disconnect between highly technical, site-specific post-mining land management strategies that primarily focus on hazard mitigation and safety, and a growing interest in engaging stakeholders (including mining experts, decision makers, and communities) via participatory approaches and place-based analyzes. We respond to these gaps by introducing a multi-stage "people-centric" framework for assessing the suitability of coal mine repurposing projects in India that prioritizes community needs and is methodologically flexible.

Assessing the Suitability of Post-mining Land Uses: Methodologies and Limitations

The most commonly used research approach to assess the suitability of various PMLUs is multi-criteria decision analysis (MCDA), a structured approach to decision-making when conflicting economic, environmental, societal, technical, and esthetic objectives are involved (either by identifying a most preferred option, distinguishing between acceptable/unacceptable outcomes, or shortlisting and ranking options). MCDA has been widely used to develop stakeholder-informed suitability rankings of PMLUs (Demirkan et al., 2022; Eshun et al., 2018; Soltanmohammadi et al., 2010), while geographic information systems (GIS) have enabled the development of spatially explicit suitability assessments (Giri et al., 2025; O'Donnell et al., 2024), including in the Indian context (Bhushan et al., 2025). Some studies incorporate expert judgment into geospatial suitability models (U.S. Geological Survey, 2024) or combine stakeholder-derived weights with GIS-based criteria (Arratia-Solar et al., 2022). However, many PMLU studies start with pre-structured decision problems, which restricts transferability and significant community involvement (Amaro et al., 2022). To address this, recent approaches emphasize co-design, early-stage stakeholder participation, and regionally aware assessments, indicating a shift toward more flexible, people-centered PMLU decision-making (Simpson et al., 2025; Svobodova et al., 2021).

A growing body of research prioritizes community engagement during mine closure and repurposing, primarily through participatory methodologies rooted in the social sciences (Bainton & Holcombe, 2018). They have found that stakeholder interviews/panels effectively surface diverse viewpoints and identify conflicts, though simpler metrics like consultation frequency, favored by mining companies, fail to address fairness, trust, and community ownership (Everingham et al., 2018, 2020). Furthermore, formal and adversarial consultation procedures, strict deadlines, and the prioritization of techno-scientific variables challenge the inclusivity of community impact assessments and highlight a need to epistemically prioritize communities' experiential and cultural knowledge (Rodon et al., 2025; Worden et al., 2024). In India, resources like the MoC and the Coal Controller Organization's R.E.C.L.A.I.M and L.I.V.E.S frameworks emphasize the centrality of community engagement, post-closure social development, ecosystem rehabilitation, and sustainability (Coal Controller Organization, 2025a, 2025b; Ministry of Coal, 2025). They advocate creating repurposing plans well before the cessation of mining activities, including conducting comprehensive assessments of land, ecology, and the socio-economic profiles of neighboring communities.

Despite numerous calls for multi-stage community involvement in mine closure and repurposing processes in the academic and gray literature, it remains relatively uncommon in practice (Measham et al., 2024; Schneider et al., 2023; Unger et al., 2020). Arratia-Solar et al.'s (2022) review found 22 studies that applied MCDA techniques to PMLU planning, of which two involved communities (and neither included a GIS analysis). We similarly found no GIS–MCDA studies that integrate community input into PMLU identification, criteria development, or model weighting. This reflects broader global trends: only 23% of governments report high levels of community participation in closure planning, while 37% report none (Stevens & Brock, 2021). Where stakeholder perspectives are included, expert and government views overwhelmingly dominate, with communities typically consulted only at the final stage.

There is also a need for place-based research to identify mutually beneficial outcomes, as geographic, cultural, and stakeholder specificities vary widely and cannot be addressed by a generic, top-down approach to identifying PMLUs. For instance, mine closure practices have been codified in high income, Global North contexts (e.g., Germany, USA, Australia), where the emphasis was on returning to the "natural" pre-mining land cover (Limpitlaw & Briel, 2014). In lower- and middle-income countries like India, however, coal mining has an immense impact on neighboring communities' direct/indirect employment and access to free/low-cost fuel and social services (e.g., schools, medicine) (Banerjee et al., 2024; Mitra et al., 2024). When a mine closes, a regional-scale transition is experienced, and effective planning thus requires understanding the ecological and socio-economic dynamics of the surrounding areas (Côte et al., 2022). Assessing the suitability of PMLUs for mine sites in India thus necessitates an understanding of the landscape at the mine site and the potential knock-on effects across the region.

A People-centric Post-mining Land Use Assessment Framework

Mine closure affects every dimension of community life: livelihoods, housing, health, environment, and social cohesion (Ronyastra et al., 2023). The long-term resilience of post-mining regions depends on establishing positive feedback loops that link environmental recovery with human well-being (Cao & Tang, 2025). This underscores the need to move beyond narrow, hazard-mitigation or engineering-centered approaches (Huang et al., 2022) toward a social-ecological systems (SES) paradigm that captures the coupled dynamics of people and landscapes.

The SES framework conceptualizes post-mining areas as integrated systems of social, economic, cultural, and ecological components. Building on Ostrom's (2009) foundational work, Cao and Tang (2025) propose a post-mining SES framework that highlights the importance of identifying system components, hierarchical levels, and cross-scale interactions. Core SES concepts, such as resilience, may be mobilized to understand how effectively a post-mining area can absorb the multifaceted impacts of mine closure (e.g., economic outmigration, social instability, land degradation). The related concept of vulnerability (a combination of exposure, sensitivity, and adaptive capacity to changes) is also crucial to effectively managing the intense risks and changes associated with mine closure (Miller et al., 2010). Agrawal et al. (2024) operationalized this definition to develop a coal vulnerability index to understand how the burden of coal phase-out is distributed across districts in India. While the authors did not work within an explicitly SES framework, their work demonstrates that SES-related concepts are already being used in the Indian post-mining context.

In response to the global research literature on PMLUs and the most recent policy developments in India on mine closure, we propose a people-centric approach synthesizing both bottom-up and top-down methods to assess the suitability of mine repurposing projects in the Indian context. The driving goals of our approach are to:

- Front-end community input and priorities, with multiple opportunities for feedback throughout the process, building trust and confidence.
- Bridge the gaps between community and participatory approaches and GIS–MCDA.
- Analyze post-mining areas and potential PMLUs as SES.

This strategy is in line with suggestions that mine closure procedures give priority to long-term societal benefits, community and regional development goals, and environmental protection (Rosa et al., 2018). We structure the approach into three overarching phases: information compilation, system understanding, and PMLU suitability analysis and planning, within which we recommend certain sub-steps and associated methods (see Figure 1).

Phase I: Compile Information

A fundamental prerequisite for any repurposing project is ensuring that the mine site is in a safe, stable condition, as failure to do so could jeopardize any future developments on the site (Ronyastra et al., 2023). Before a closed coal mine can be transformed into a new productive use, it must first meet baseline environmental standards, including soil health, terrain stability, contamination risk, and surface structure. The foundational criteria associated with reclamation and remediation thus determine these baseline standards and assess whether repurposing is feasible in the first place. This is especially important in India, where many mines being considered for repurposing today were closed decades prior. Essential steps at this stage include analyzing mine closure plans to identify mine characteristics, year of closure, remediation or rehabilitation processes undertaken, and the presence of settlements in the area. Fieldwork (e.g., soil/water/geotechnical surveys) may also need to be conducted to assess the state of the mine lands, including safety hazards, slope stability, water, and soil quality. Although this step is mostly expert-driven (geotechnical surveys, soil and water testing, site inspections), incorporating local knowledge is beneficial, particularly in places where communities have long interacted with post-closure landscapes. The availability of land for large-scale PMLUs is impacted by settlements located within mine boundaries, which may be included in closure plans, where applicable.

Eliciting the needs, goals, and priorities of impacted communities and regional stakeholders is the other focus of Phase I. This process should closely involve personnel from local non-governmental organizations and universities in addition to collaborating with mining staff from the associated subsidiary. Activities such

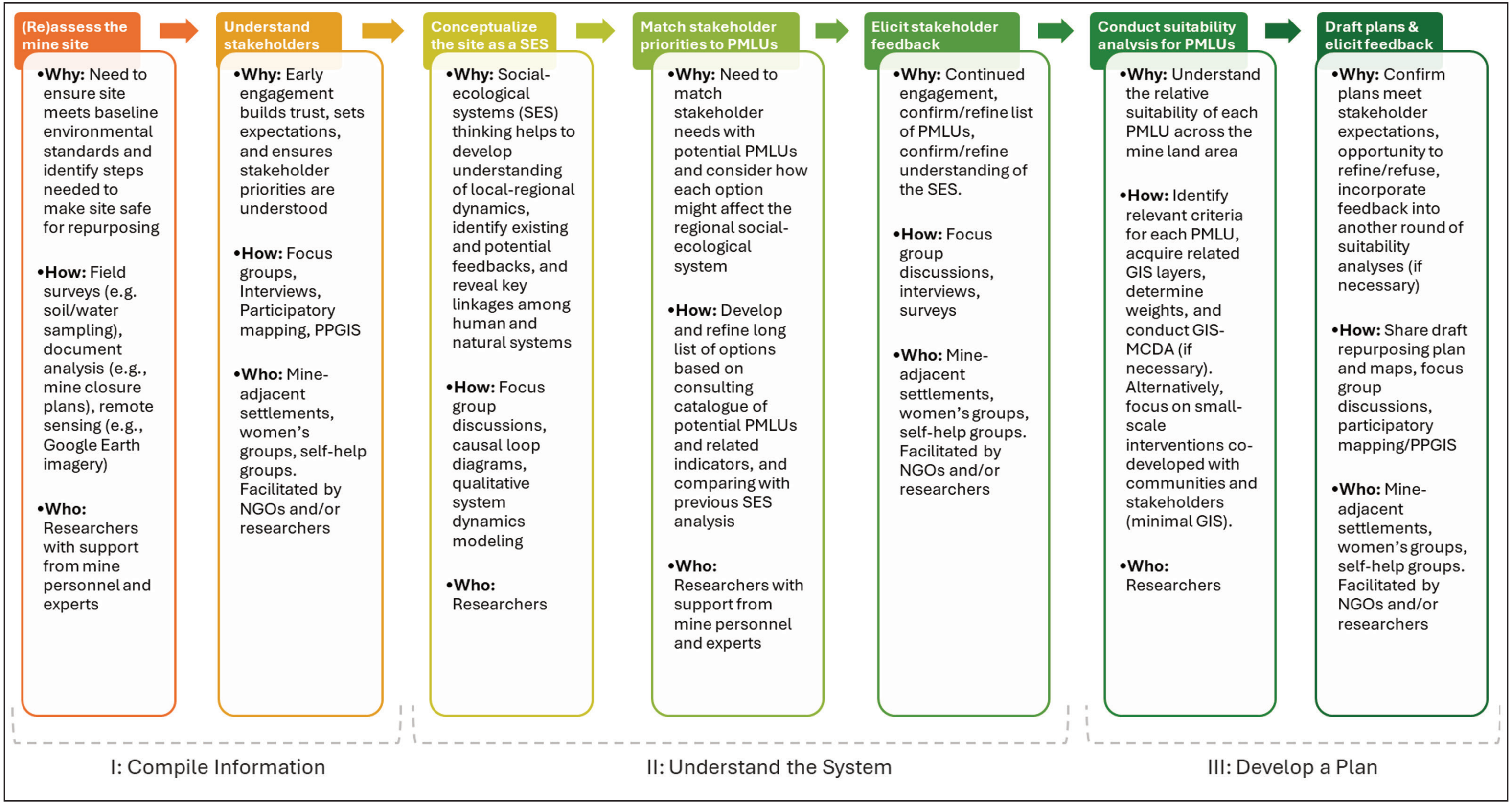

Figure 1. Three Phases of a People-centric Approach to Coal Mine Repurposing.

as focus groups, participatory mapping, visioning exercises, participatory GIS techniques, and evaluations of development plans at the district and village levels can be conducted as part of frameworks such as participatory rural appraisal, which prioritizes participatory data collection processes and community ownership and sharing of knowledge (Chambers, 1994). Crucially, communities should not be viewed as homogeneous; conscious efforts are required to include voices from women, marginalized groups, and people with different social backgrounds. This process should also seek to incorporate inputs from regional decision makers (e.g., District Collectors), miners, non-governmental organizations, and academics. These perspectives help to align PMLU options with existing plans and institutional realities, while simultaneously capturing regional social-ecological interactions.

Phase II: Understand the System and Build a Shortlist

Phase II focuses on matching stakeholder priorities with technically feasible PMLUs. Doing this effectively requires assessing how each proposed PMLU might fit within and affect the existing SES that the mine site is embedded in. Visualizing the structure of the SES helps to test and clarify system understanding and identify potential feedback (both positive and negative). A useful method for visualizing and examining feedback in intricate social-ecological contexts is qualitative system dynamics modeling, particularly through the use of causal loop diagrams (CLDs) (Egerer et al., 2021). CLDs identify reinforcing and balancing loops, map variables and their causal relationships, and show how system behaviors change over time. By co-creating CLDs, stakeholders and researchers can identify leverage points, and develop a common understanding of the dynamics of the mine site and its surrounding areas, articulate the SES-specific complexities of assigning PMLUs, and identify cause-and-effect dynamics between stakeholders and the mining landscape. While co-creation with stakeholders is ideal, resource or time constraints may necessitate researchers working alone to collate and synthesize the information collected during Phase I.

Once consensus has been reached on the CLD and its representation of the SES, the next step is to develop a long list of potential PMLUs that match the priorities identified by the communities. This should be refined to a shortlist through a screening process, based on existing knowledge of the surrounding landscape. Key components of this screening process include reexamining constraints (such as hydrology, topography, and energy resources) and determining how each PMLU might affect the SES.

The next step is to translate the qualitative insights from the systems thinking exercises and community engagement into quantitative scores for prioritizing the PMLU selection (Figure 2). The CLD encodes causal connections between variables and can therefore be treated as a directed social-ecological network, wherein the simplest proxy for “importance” is the degree (number of connected links) (Chignell, 2023). Both qualitative and quantitative network analysis have a long history of use in sustainability science, and network metrics are widely applied to help conceptualize and analyze key SES concepts (Bodin et al., 2019; Sayles

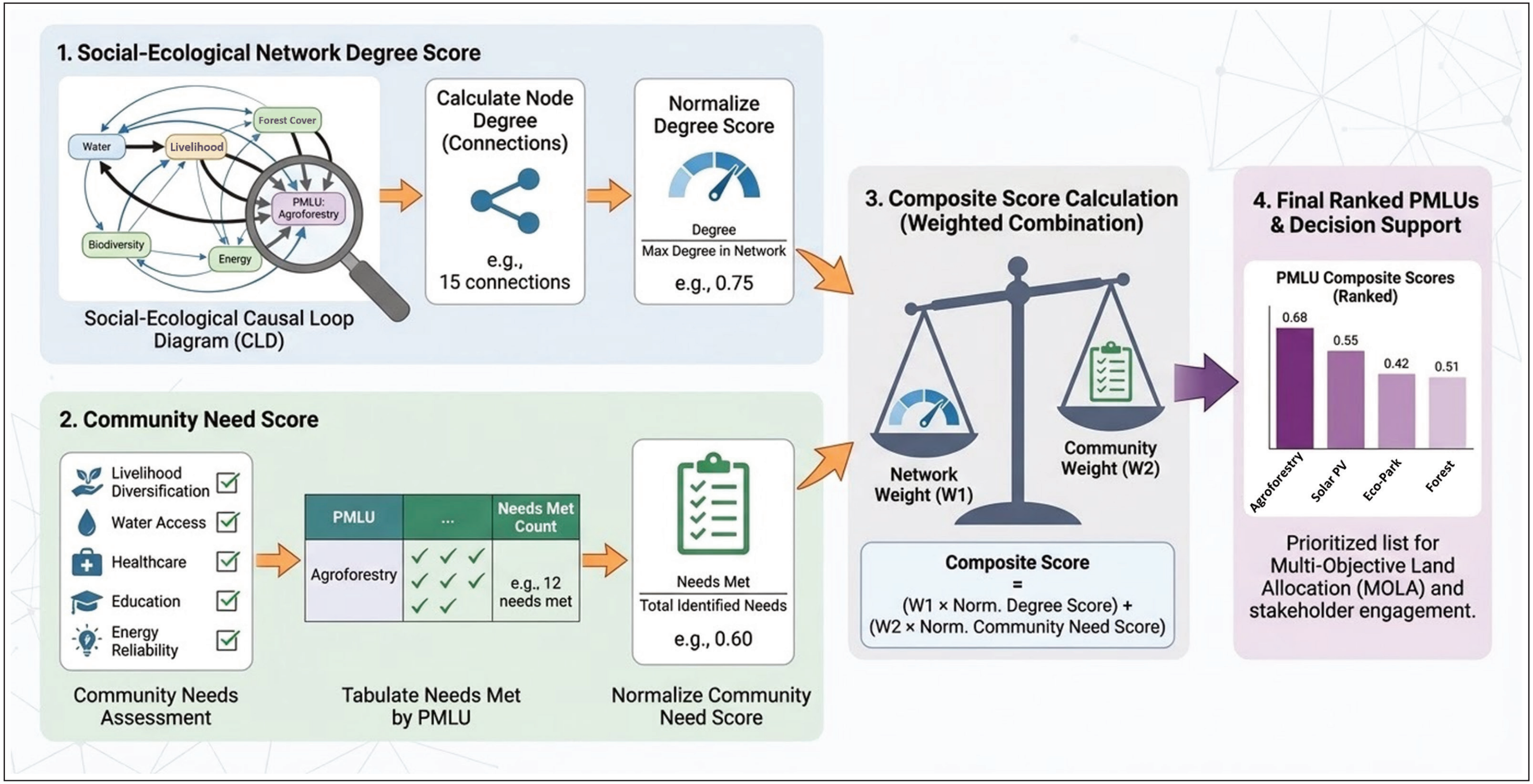

Figure 2. Combining Network-based and Community-based Insights for Post-mining Land Use (PMLU) Scoring.

et al., 2019). In the context of coal-mine repurposing, for example, a higher total degree (as well as other metrics like betweenness) signals a PMLU that is both fed by many variables and feeds many others (i.e., a "lever" in the system).

Calculating the network-centrality weights (degree-based) tells us how structurally important each PMLU is in the network, but it does not tell us how well each PMLU meets community needs. To make the ranking responsive to what communities actually want, a community-need score can be calculated, simply by listing out the needs as stated in community assessment reports or interviews and counting the number of needs met by each PMLU. These weights are purely demand-driven: they reflect how many distinct community-stated priorities each PMLU can address, ignoring any technical feasibility or cost considerations.

Combining the community need score with the earlier network-centrality weights (or any cost-benefit analysis) can produce a balanced composite priority index that respects both what the system needs to change and what the community actually wants. This can then be used to create a final shortlist of ranked PMLUs and even serve as weights in subsequent GIS–MCDA procedures. Prior to moving to Phase III, the final CLD and ranked list of PMLUs should be shared with the involved communities and other regional stakeholders to corroborate the understanding of the system, reaffirm consent and transparent decision-making, and reduce the chances of later conflict.

Phase III: Develop a Site-specific Repurposing Plan

The final phase is to identify the most suitable areas of the mine site for each PMLU on the stakeholder-approved shortlist, and to use this to develop a repurposing plan. The first step involves conducting a suitability analysis of each shortlisted PMLU based on multiple biophysical and social criteria. The level of complexity of the suitability analysis should match the specific context of the mine site in question. For example, mine sites with smaller areas and dense populations are likely a better fit for low-tech approaches (i.e., small-scale interventions co-developed with communities and limited use of GIS). Sites with larger areas and limited human settlements would allow for a more complex, data-intensive GIS–MCDA. In cases where the shortlist consists of only one or two PMLUs, it may be sufficient to conduct a GIS–MCDA for each PMLU and manually resolve spatial conflicts in any areas where both PMLUs are highly suitable. In cases with more than two PMLUs, the GIS–MCDA may benefit from the use of conflict resolution algorithms such as multi-objective land allocation (MOLA) (Eastman et al., 1993); MOLA can assign equal weights to each PMLU or incorporate custom weights such as the composite scores derived in Phase II, further connecting insights gained in earlier phases into the suitability analysis. Regardless, the GIS–MCDA should follow standard processes, tailored to the specificities of the mine site in question. Resulting draft maps and plans should be returned to communities and stakeholders for validation, ensuring transparency, informed consent, and the opportunity to revise or reject proposals. This final opportunity for feedback strengthens legitimacy and reduces conflict before proceeding to planning or implementation.

Conclusion

This perspective has discussed the evolving policy landscape pertaining to mine closure and PMLUs, provided an overview of the main approaches used to assess the suitability of PMLUs, and proposed a people-centric framework for repurposing India's abandoned coal mines into sustainable, community-driven PMLUs. Although there is a robust research literature about the technical and scientific aspects of mine closure, socio-economic impact assessments remain uncommon, especially those involving consultations with communities in post-mining areas. A gap persists between grassroots, community-led initiatives and more technical or formalized processes of mine repurposing, and research from the social sciences remains notably scarce.

Our proposed "people-centric" framework for assessing the suitability of PMLUs aims to bridge this gap by integrating stakeholder engagement, spatial decision-support tools, and SES thinking. It seeks to overcome the disconnect between participatory, GIS, and MCDA approaches and guarantee that PMLU planning is not only analytically sound but also socially responsive and based on the priorities of impacted communities by directly incorporating community-driven inputs into the spatial decision-making process. The novelty of this approach lies in its use of SES and the explicit integration of participatory engagement with GIS–MCDA, bringing together two methodological streams that are typically applied in isolation. This enables the identification of coal mine PMLUs that are not only technically feasible, environmentally sound, and economically viable, but also deliver tangible livelihood benefits and preserve sociocultural ties to the landscape.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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

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Research Note

Complexity, Ingenuity and the Knowledge Architecture of Modernity: Interdisciplinarity as Institutional Response

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Abstract

The commentary argues that modernity is characterised by structural complexity and 'wicked problems' that expose a persistent mismatch between systemic challenges and fragmented knowledge architectures. It proposes 'ingenuity', or the production of actionable ideas, as a productive force, and positions think tanks and interdisciplinary platforms as institutional spaces that translate knowledge into adaptive, policy-relevant pathways. The article identifies core lacunae within university systems, including disciplinary silos, citation-centred incentives, and limited engagement with policy practice and grey literature, which constrain the production of actionable ideas. Interdisciplinarity is therefore framed not as a cosmetic aggregation of perspectives but as a problem-driven integrative practice that redefines rigour through methodological plurality, systems thinking and institutional collaboration.

Keywords

Interdisciplinary perspective, wicked problems, complexity, institutions, ingenuity gap

Complexity and 'Wicked Problems'

The defining feature of modernity is structural complexity. Modern-day problems are intricately intertwined, rendering multidimensionality and complexity to the

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challenges societies face today. Climate instability, digital disruption, hydropolitical tensions, public health fragility, volatile geopolitics and the ever-shifting global order, developmental challenges such as poverty, health and education, supply-chain bottlenecks, ecological stresses and cultural shocks, converge to create a unique global equilibrium that can most aptly be described as *polycrisis* (Tooze, 2022). It has now been acknowledged in public policy discourses that the traditional knowledge architectures are not equipped to address the complex problems confronting modern societies.

The distinction between complicated and complex problems is therefore foundational. Complicated problems, while difficult, can be decomposed into constituent simple problems. Simple problems are those that can be expressed in the framework of the ordinate and the abscissa. They admit solutions within linear analytical frameworks and reductionist modelling approaches that have long underpinned scientific inquiry. Eventually, aggregating the constituent solutions of the various constituent simple problems can provide solutions, or multiple point solutions, each of whose suitability can change with time and space. Complex problems, however, resist such decomposition. They arise from interacting variables embedded within adaptive social–ecological–technological–economic–cultural–political systems, producing feedback loops, emergent behaviour and unintended consequences that defy linear prediction.

Modernity has intensified this complexity. Industrialisation, globalisation, digitisation, servicification and financialisation have created unprecedented interdependencies across domains that were historically analysed separately. Climate change exemplifies this shift: it simultaneously engages atmospheric science, geopolitics, development finance, migration, public health and intergenerational ethics. Artificial intelligence similarly reflects duality—generating productivity gains while raising questions of bias, governance, labour displacement and inequality. Agricultural policy demonstrates comparable tensions, where subsidy regimes designed to enhance food security may deepen water stress, distort resource allocation and create ecological trade-offs. These are not technical problems alone; they are 'wicked problems' (Head, 2015) involving competing values, incomplete knowledge and evolving system dynamics.

Institutionalised Reductionism, Disciplinary Fragmentation and Lack of 'Ingenuity'

Yet knowledge institutions continue to operate largely within disciplinary structures designed for a more stable world. Universities remain organised around intellectual compartments, with incentive systems that privilege methodological orthodoxy, disciplinary journals and citation-based measures of merit. Though such structures safeguard rigour, their strict adherence to disciplinary boundaries not only flares reductionist thinking, but progressively discourages integrative inquiry and intellectual risk-taking. The result is a structural mismatch: problems are systemic, while knowledge production remains fragmented. Addressing this mismatch requires rethinking not the value of disciplines but the architecture through which they interact.

This mismatch can be more appropriately delineated as the gap between the production, or supply, of and the demand for 'ingenuity', or actionable ideas to solve complex problems, as defined by Homer-Dixon (1995). In an extension of classical economic thinking, where production is expressed as a function of four factors, namely land, labour, capital and enterprise, 'ingenuity' can well be represented as the fifth factor. This position becomes even more prominent for modern complex societies, where the capacity to generate actionable ideas becomes a productive force in its own right and emerges as the differentiating force, explaining the divergences between the total factor productivities of two economies (Homer-Dixon, 2000).

This concept is particularly powerful when distinguishing between technical and social ingenuity. Technical ingenuity refers to technological innovations, analytical tools and methodological advances that address specific dimensions of problems. Social ingenuity, by contrast, concerns institutional arrangements, governance frameworks, organisational design and behavioural mechanisms that enable collective action. Development outcomes depend not only on technological solutions but on the capacity to align incentives, manage trade-offs and coordinate diverse actors. The gap between the demand for such ideas and their supply—the ingenuity gap—constitutes a fundamental dimension of development disparity.

Extending this argument further, ingenuity may be conceptualised as a form of capital. Inclusive wealth frameworks typically recognise physical, human, social and natural capital (United Nations Environment Programme, 2023). Incorporating ingenuity as a fifth capital highlights the importance of idea generation in shaping adaptive development pathways (Ghosh, 2025a). Many policy failures are not failures of resources but failures of imagination—the inability to produce ideas appropriate to complex challenges. This perspective shifts analytical attention from resource availability to institutional capacity for knowledge production and translation.

The Think Tanks and Interdisciplinarity

The institutional actors best positioned to mediate this translation are think tanks. Situated between universities and consulting firms, think tanks occupy a unique epistemic space. They function as ideational laboratories that translate interdisciplinary insights into policy-relevant pathways. Their contribution lies not only in research generation but in convening cross-sector dialogue, interrogating institutional design, democratising access to data and exploring counterfactual policy scenarios (Ghosh, 2025b). Unlike academic institutions, whose primary audience is scholarly peers, think tanks operate at the interface between knowledge and decision-making. Their role is to curate relevance—converting theoretical insight into actionable frameworks while acknowledging uncertainty and the absence of definitive solutions (Ghosh, 2025b).

This mediating role becomes particularly important in complex policy environments where knowledge is distributed across actors and formats. A significant proportion of actionable insight resides in grey literature—policy briefs, mission reports, implementation documentation, parliamentary committee findings and field studies. These sources capture real-time learning, institutional memory and practical constraints that rarely appear in peer-reviewed journals. This is the space often neglected and dismissed by academia. Dismissing grey literature as inferior overlooks the lived laboratory of policy. Engaging it critically expands the evidentiary base necessary for systems thinking and strengthens the relevance of academic research.

Meaningful interdisciplinarity must therefore be problem-driven rather than cosmetic. It involves integrating methods rather than merely assembling perspectives. Interdisciplinary research begins with real-world problems, accepts methodological plurality and recognises that technical ingenuity must be complemented by social ingenuity. It interrogates incentive structures, institutional path dependencies, power asymmetries and ethical trade-offs. Importantly, it requires methodological flexibility—allowing research questions to determine methods rather than disciplinary conventions to dictate problem framing. This implies that rigour must be redefined, rather than being seen through the lens of academic journals operating in disciplinary silos, or the compartmentalised academic departments operating in the ivory towers, keeping reality in oblivion. Rigour, therefore, should encompass conceptual clarity, transparent assumptions, empirical grounding, ethical reflexivity and methodological appropriateness rather than methodological perfection and disciplinary purity alone.

Complexity and Policy Failures

A useful illustration of these dynamics can be witnessed with the Farakka Barrage in West Bengal. Constructed with the specific objective of improving navigability in Kolkata Port through sediment flushing, the barrage represented a technically rational engineering intervention. However, its systemic consequences reveal the nature of wicked complexity. Altered sediment flows have affected delta morphology and ecological processes, contributing to land subsidence and coastal vulnerability. The intervention has generated geopolitical tensions between India and Bangladesh, regional disputes over flooding between West Bengal and Bihar, and the shrinkage of the tidally active component of the Ganges delta, which encompasses the Sundarbans archipelago, due to sediment arrest in the upstream of the barrage, while creating new dependencies for water security in the non-tidal part of West Bengal. Removing the barrage would address some concerns while creating others; maintaining it perpetuates trade-offs (Ghosh, 2022). The case demonstrates that complex interventions cannot be evaluated through single-discipline analysis. They require integrated understanding across hydrology, ecology, economics, politics and social systems.

Such examples also explain why policy failures persist despite technically sound solutions. Many failures are not technical failures but failures of integration. Policies falter when governance capacity is weak, incentives are misaligned, social acceptance is ignored, or ethical implications are overlooked. Technical ingenuity without social ingenuity produces fragility. Effective policy design must incorporate reflexive feedback loops, adaptive learning mechanisms and institutional flexibility capable of responding to evolving conditions (Maxim et al., 2009; Ostrom, 2009). This insight reinforces the argument that knowledge systems must evolve alongside the complexity they seek to address.

The implications for academic publishing are significant. Interdisciplinary journals possess the potential to become knowledge bridges rather than repositories. To realise this potential, they must encourage policy-linked scholarship, systems-based case studies, methodological pluralism and engagement with grey literature. They should facilitate dialogue across academia, policy and society while avoiding hyper-specialised debates detached from real-world relevance. The challenge is therefore institutional rather than editorial. Journals must help reshape the norms through which knowledge is validated and applied.

Why is Academia Failing Societies?

Structural barriers to such transformation remain substantial. Promotion criteria tied to journal rankings, peer review scepticism towards methodological plurality, discipline-segmented funding streams and citation-centric impact metrics constrain interdisciplinary work. As long as intellectual merit is equated primarily with disciplinary publication, integration will remain difficult. Redefining rigour and impact is therefore central to closing the ingenuity gap. Impact must be measured not only through citations but through influence on policy design, institutional reform and societal outcomes.

The broader vision that emerges is one of institutional redesign. Complexity has redefined knowledge needs; knowledge must now redefine its institutions. Universities remain indispensable custodians of rigour, but they cannot operate in isolation. Think tanks, policy platforms and interdisciplinary journals must function as integrative spaces that translate knowledge into adaptive policy pathways. When liberal arts inform science, science informs policy, policy incorporates ethics and knowledge engages society, the production of social ingenuity becomes possible.

This perspective also reframes the role of researchers. Early-career scholars must master disciplinary foundations while cultivating systems thinking. They must engage with practitioners, critically read grey literature and develop ethical reasoning capacities capable of navigating trade-offs inherent in complex problems. Communication across epistemic communities becomes a core skill, as knowledge translation is central to closing the gap between research and action. Interdisciplinary scholarship thus requires both intellectual curiosity and institutional courage.

The Future of Research Ecosystems

Ultimately, the future of research ecosystems will be determined less by impact factors and more by their capacity to generate actionable, adaptive and ethically grounded ideas. Think tanks act as incubators of such ingenuity, interpreting the maladies of complexity and designing pathways rather than definitive solutions. Interdisciplinary journals face a similar choice: remain archival structures or become bridges connecting knowledge to societal transformation.

The urgency of this choice is evident. If knowledge institutions continue to reward compartmentalisation, dismiss grey literature and privilege citation over relevance, the ingenuity gap will persist. Conversely, institutionalising integrative spaces that value systems thinking, methodological pluralism and policy engagement can strengthen the intellectual infrastructure required for modern governance. In this sense, the question is not whether interdisciplinarity is desirable but whether knowledge systems can adapt quickly enough to the complexity of the problems they confront.

The architecture of knowledge production, therefore, stands at a critical juncture. Embracing complexity requires recognising ingenuity as central to development, redefining rigour and redesigning institutional pathways that connect research with action. If these shifts occur, knowledge ecosystems will not merely respond to modernity's challenges—they will help shape adaptive, resilient and inclusive futures.

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Opinion Article

Shortage to Surplus Women in Latter Life: A Changing Landscape in South Asia

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Abstract

The world is aging, and South Asia is no exception. Therefore, many issues which were concerned with the young and working population are now matters to the elderly as well, such as the sex ratio. The poor sex ratio is a well-known fact of South Asia, the region as a whole and individual countries too. But often this discussion is broadly limited to "at birth" and "overall population." However, here we are trying to explore the sex ratio at later life and how its dynamics have changed over the period of time. The analysis utilizes data from the 2019 revision of the World Population Prospects compiled by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, covering age- and sex-specific population estimates and life expectancy for 1950–2050. Demographic decomposition analysis was employed to isolate the contributions of population growth and aging, while sex ratio and life expectancy measures were used to assess gender differentials in demographic changes and longevity. Our preliminary results suggest that the poor sex ratio was very much evident in old age as well till the very end of the 20th century. However, women outnumbered men at the beginning of this 21st century, and this will continue in the coming decades. However, this scenario varies from country to country; for instance, India and Sri Lanka are on two different paths and speeds but in the same direction. Even with a surplus sex ratio in later life, South Asia is not equivalent to the developed countries in North America and Europe.

Keywords

Older person, life expectancy, birth rate, mortality, sex ratio, gender, South Asia

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Introduction

The last century's discussion was mostly focused on some of the crucial events in demography and economics: baby boom, sex ratio, poverty, and unemployment among the youth. In addition, the scientific community and researchers spent a significant amount of time discussing and debating about the short life span of humans in general and developing nations in particular. Due to technological innovation and medical advancements, we were able to control the baby boom. Further, the industrial revolution and technical progress helped to increase productivity and, therefore, employment opportunities. Mass production and industrial uprising led to reduced unemployment, poverty, and finally, government and non-government agencies together were able to meet the health care challenges (Banu, 2016; Dreze & Sen, 2013). However, this phenomenon was more prominent in the advanced economies than in the developing nations. South Asia, a developing region, also saw some improvement in terms of socio-economic and health indicators in the late 20th and early 21st century due to globalization, access to markets by world economic players, and so on. This led to better livelihoods and improvements in the living standards of the Indian Subcontinent population (UNDESA, 2019a; World Bank, 2017).

Population aging has emerged as a major demographic transition in South Asia, driven by sustained declines in fertility and improvements in public health, and rising life expectancy has gradually increased the proportion and absolute number of older persons in the population. Countries across the region are experiencing a transition from relatively young age structures to older populations, although the pace and extent of aging vary considerably (UNDESA, 2019b). This demographic shift has important implications for healthcare, social protection, family support systems, and the broader economic and social organization of society.

Gender imbalance constitutes an important dimension of demographic change in South Asia. Historically, many countries in the region have exhibited an imbalance in the sex composition of the population due to gender-biased mortality, son preference, sex-selective practices, and differences in access to health and nutrition. At old ages, however, the direction of the imbalance may differ because women tend to live longer than men. As a result, gender differences in survival and longevity shape the age-specific sex composition of the population and influence patterns of dependency, widowhood, and care in later life. (Harriss & Watson, 1987).

Despite a growing body of literature on aging and gender, an important gap remains in relation to the old-age sex ratio in South Asia. Existing research has primarily focused on child sex ratio, sex-selective behavior, and gender disparities among younger populations, while comparatively little attention has been devoted to the sex composition of the elderly population. In the 1990s, Amartya Sen wrote about "missing women," arguing that the female population ratio was considerably lower in developing countries than in more developed countries such as Canada, the USA, the UK, and Australia (Sen, 1990, 1992). However, the situation has improved, but these findings are still relevant to developing regions such as South Asia, where the sex ratio at birth and at younger ages is lower (UNDESA, 2019c). The limited evidence on older-age sex ratios constrains understanding of how gendered survival patterns influence population aging. Consequently, further research is needed to examine trends and variations in sex ratios among older persons and their implications for social and demographic change in the region. To what extent does the lower sex ratio observed in the general population persist among older persons? If such a pattern exists, how has it changed over time, and what is its contemporary and future status? This study aims to addresses these concerns. The second section provides details on the methodology and data source. The third section discusses aging scenario in the South Asia region and member countries. The following section highlights disparities in life expectancy between males and females. Subsequently, the study examines sex ratio at younger and older ages and their changes over time. The discussion section provides an overview of the main findings. Finally, the article ends with concluding remarks and policy prospectives.

Methodology and Data Source

For analytical purposes, the study employed demographic decomposition analysis, life expectancy, and sex ratio. Demographic decomposition analysis was used to identify the relative contribution of population aging and population growth, while life expectancy and sex ratio were examined to understand gender differences in longevity and population composition.

Demographic decomposition analysis was employed to examine how the distribution of the aging population is associated with the annual growth rate of the total and the elderly population. The elderly population was defined as persons aged 65 years and above. The share of the elderly population in the total population was first calculated as:

$$A_t = \frac{E_t}{P_t} \times 100$$

where A_t = percentage of the elderly population at time t, E_t = elderly population at time t, and P_t = total population at time t.

The annual growth rate of the total population between the two time periods was estimated using the exponential growth formula:

$$r_p = \left(\frac{P_1}{P_0}\right)^{\frac{1}{n}} - 1$$

where r_p indicates the annual growth rate, P_0 is the total population in the initial year, P_1 is the defined total population in the later years, and n represents the number of years between the two periods. Similarly, the annual growth rate of the elderly population (e and E) was estimated.

$$r_e = \left(\frac{E_1}{E_0}\right)^{\frac{1}{n}} - 1$$

To assess the extent to which population aging was driven by differential growth in the elderly population relative to the total population, the difference between the two growth rates was calculated:

$$D = r_e - r_p$$

where D indicates the excess growth of the elderly population over the total population. A positive value of D implies that the elderly population is growing faster than the total population, indicating population aging, whereas a negative to near-zero value suggests little or no aging effect.

Life expectancy is the average number of years a person is expected to live, assuming the current age-specific mortality rate remains constant throughout that person's lifetime. Most commonly, "life expectancy at birth" refers to the average number of years a newborn is expected to live under the prevailing mortality conditions. Life expectancy estimation is carried out using age- and sex-specific mortality data from census, survey, and vital registration systems. In case of incomplete mortality data, life table and Bayesian hierarchical model are considered to estimate female life expectancy first, then derive male life expectancy by modeling the gap between female and male life expectancy.

In the standard table, l_0 is usually set equal to 100 {,}000 births, so e_0 becomes the total future person-years lived by that synthetic cohort divided by 100 {,}000 (UNDESA, 2022). According to the life table method, life expectancy at age x is calculated as:

$$e_{x=\frac{T_x}{L_x}}$$

where e_x = life expectancy at age x

T_x = total person-years lived by the cohort after age x
L_x = number of survivors at exact age x

Here we have considered the life expectancy at 0–4 (e = 0–4) and 65 (x = 65) years.

The sex ratio was estimated as the number of females per 1,000 males in the population. Age-and sex-specific population data were obtained from the relevant census or population projection dataset. For each population group, the total number of females was divided by the total number of males and multiplied by 1,000 (Alam et al., 2012).

$$SR = \frac{F}{M} \times 1{,}000$$

where SR is the sex ratio, F is the female population, and M is the male population.

For age-specific groups, such as children (0–4) and the elderly (65+), a similar procedure was applied separately to each age category.

$$SR_x = \frac{F_x}{M_x} \times 1{,}000$$

where SR_x is the sex ratio for the specific age group x.

The major analytical variables—population distribution, life expectancy, and sex ratio for the period 1950–2050—were obtained from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), specifically the 2019 revision of the World Population Prospects database. This source provides internationally comparable estimates and projections of the population by age and sex, as well as life expectancy at birth and at older ages, for all countries and regions. Age- and sex-specific population counts for children and the elderly were extracted to examine changes in population distribution and to calculate sex ratios, while male and female life expectancy estimates were used to assess differences in longevity over time.

Population Aging in South Asia

Economic prosperity and better health systems lead to healthy and longer life expectancy in general and in South Asia in particular. Every 15th person in the Indian Subcontinent is "older,"[1] which is about 7% of the total population (over 144 million in the year 2025). This population proportion varies from country to country. To illustrate, Sri Lanka has the highest percentage of older population in the region (i.e., 13.4%), whereas Afghanistan has only 2.9% of its population in this age bracket. However, India's share precedes the South Asia elderly cohort proportion, with 7.6 percentage older population. The elderly population distribution in Bhutan and Nepal is 6.9% and 6.3%, respectively, whereas in Bangladesh, 6% of the population is aged 65 years and above.

The elderly proportion does not only increase in the future, but this population will grow much faster than the rest. The general population growth rate is about 1.2% per annum, whereas the elderly population will grow by 4.2% annually. Due to this, the number of elderly population will grow much faster in the future, and over 13% of the South Asian population will be old by 2050. It is worthwhile to note that in some of the countries, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, over one-fifth of the population will constitute the elderly cohort. Other nations, such as Bangladesh, India, and Nepal, are following the same pattern with over 13% of the population. In contrast, Pakistan (about 8%) and Afghanistan (over 5%) will have a lower elderly population than the rest of the region, and both still have time to cash in on the demographic dividend (Figure 1).

Longevity, Gender, and Older Population

Generally, life expectancy is computed at various stages of life, such as at birth, young, and old. Here, we will mainly focus on life expectancy at younger ages (0–4) and older ages (i.e., 65 years); however, we start our discussion with life expectancy at birth.

The life expectancy (at birth) in South Asia was 37 years in 1950–1955, with the lowest in Nepal (35 years) and the highest in Sri Lanka (55 years). So, the gap among the countries with the lowest and highest life expectancy was about 20 years. This scenario changed by 2000–2005, when South Asia's life expectancy went up to 64 years, and similar figures were true for India, Nepal, and Pakistan.

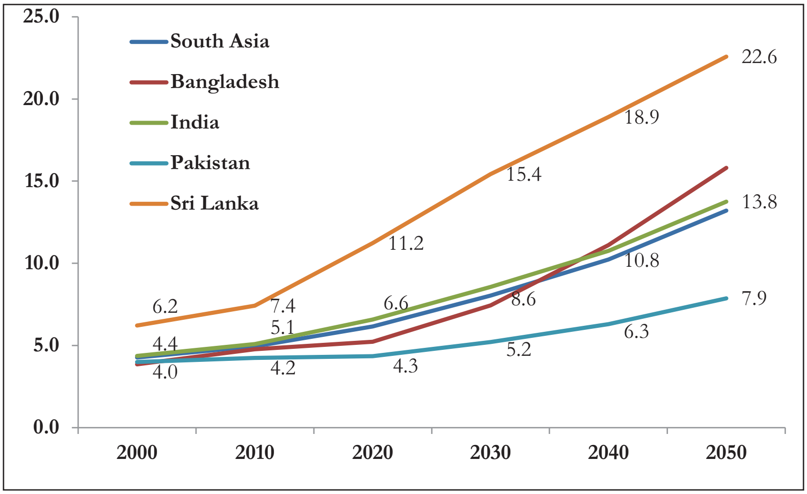

Figure 1. Population Dynamics among Older Cohorts (Aged 65 Years and Above) in Selected South Asian Countries.

Source: Author's calculations derived from 2019 data published by UNDESA (2019).

Further, Sri Lanka retained its first position with 74 years of life expectancy among the South Asian countries. Also, the regional gaps among the countries came down to half, that is, 10 years. However, India went ahead of Pakistan (68 years), with a 70-year life span 2020–2025, but remained behind the South Asia region (71 years), Nepal (72 years), and Sri Lanka (78 years). Moreover, the recent projections of UNDESA reveal that this gap will remain in 2045–2050. To illustrate, Pakistan's population survival at birth will be 71 years, whereas Sri Lanka's will be 82 years, Bangladesh's 79 years, Nepal's 77 years, and 75 years for both India and South Asia. Over the years, the gap between the highest and lowest life expectancy among the South Asian countries has receded, but it is still 10 years apart.

Old-age (at the age of 65 years) life expectancy was about 10 years in 1950–1955 for most of the South Asian countries, except Pakistan and Sri Lanka (12 and 11 years, respectively). However, Sri Lanka took the lead in terms of later life expectancy with 16 years, followed by Pakistan (14 years) by 2000–2005, and Nepal (13 years) ended up being the country with the lowest life expectancy at the age of 65 years. However, Nepal's life expectancy (14 years) has improved in recent times, 2020–2025, and now it is parallel to India and Pakistan and only behind Sri Lanka (18 years) and Bangladesh (16 years). Further, Nepal's old-age life expectancy will be ahead of Pakistan and India in the future. In contrast to life expectancy at birth, where the gap among South Asian countries is decreasing, the old-age life expectancy gap in later life (e^{65}) has increased over time. The gap was 3 years in 1950–1955; however, this has increased to over 4 years by 2020–2025. In addition, this gap will further widen in the future.

As we are aware, life expectancy varies with gender, men and women. Women tend to live longer than their male counterparts. This is mostly due to women's strong biological structure and higher survival chances than men (Hazzard, 1989). Therefore, this also influences their overall life expectancy (e^0), and a similar case can be seen for South Asia, where women's life expectancy is about 72 years and men's 69 years as of 2020–2025. This trend is also applicable in old age, where women's life expectancy is 16 years and men's is 14 years for South Asia. The additional years of life expectancy for women were less than a year in 1950–1955 for South Asia. This was applicable to most of the countries, except Bangladesh. Further, Sri Lanka and Pakistan reported 3 and 2 additional years of life expectancy for women than men, respectively. South Asian women live 1 year more than their male counterparts. Additional years of women's survival were higher for India (1.2 years), Nepal (1.2 years), and Sri Lanka (2.8 years) as compared to South Asia. Women's additional years of life expectancy are 1.1, 1.6, 2.5, and 3.1 years for South Asia, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, respectively, for 2020–2025. This gap will further widen to approximately 2 years by 2045–2050 for South Asia and India. Elderly women in Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh will live 2.6 years more than elderly males in their respective countries. However, this gap will start decreasing from 2045–2050, especially for Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh (Figure 2).

A Journey from a Shortage to Surplus Women

As we know, sex ratios in younger ages are lower in developing countries and are particularly true for South Asia, where the son-preference culture is much stronger than education and awareness (Dreze & Sen, 2013). This is largely due to female feticide, lack of nutrition, healthcare, and other facilities for the girl child when

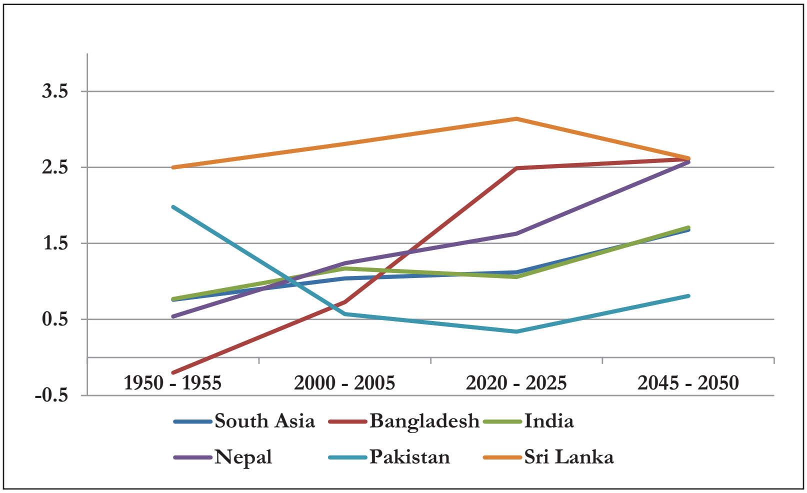

Figure 2. Additional Years of Life Expectancy for Women as Compared to Men (e_{65}).

Source: Estimated by the author using data from UNDESA (2019).

she is born and during childhood and adolescence. This sex ratio gap is even wider if we compare it with the developed world, like North America, Europe, and so on, and Amartya Sen called it “missing women” (Sen, 1990, 1992). Similar figures can be seen in Figure 3, where the sex ratio is lower in all countries for both age groups—0–4 and 65+ years—except Nepal, India, and Sri Lanka. However, all countries’ sex ratios dropped in successive years for the age group 0–4 years. However, in some countries, a surplus of women relative to men in older age groups began to emerge in the late 20th century. This shift became more pronounced from around 1995 onward, particularly within the older cohorts, reflecting changes in mortality patterns and increasing female longevity.

After five decades, the sex ratio changed, and most of the South Asian countries are approaching a balanced sex ratio in older age groups, that is, the 65 years and above age group. To illustrate, the surplus sex ratio originated in Sri Lanka and Afghanistan, along with Nepal and India, by 2000. These results are visible in Figure 3, where women outnumbered the men in old age.

This slowly started in the early years of the 21st century and can be seen more prominently in Nepal, Sri Lanka, India, and Afghanistan. Surplus women in old age continue in these countries, and a few other countries have joined them as well, such as the Maldives. Also, the number of women became more substantial for these countries in 2020 as compared to the beginning of the millennium (Figure 4).

The sex ratio among the older population exceeds the earlier estimates by a good number in the countries which we have mentioned earlier. Some of the other countries have also joined the league, such as Pakistan and Bangladesh. These are the countries where aging is more severe as compared to the others (Figure 5).

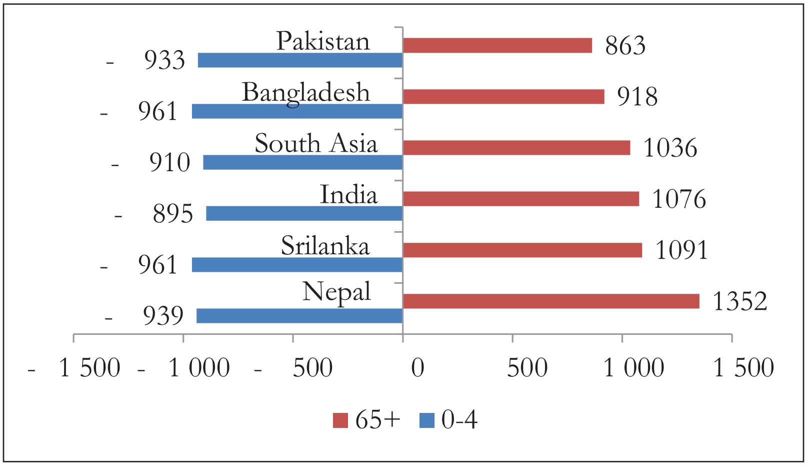

Figure 3. Sex Ratio of Children and the Elderly in South Asian Countries at the Beginning of the Millennium (2000).

Source: Calculated by the author using 2019 data provided by UNDESA.

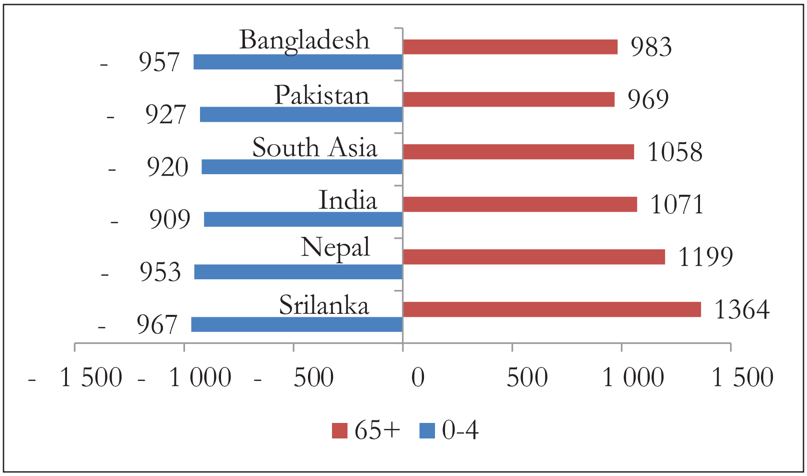

Figure 4. Comparison of Sex Ratio among Children and the Elderly in South Asia, 2020.

Source: Computed by the author accessing UNDESA (2019) data.

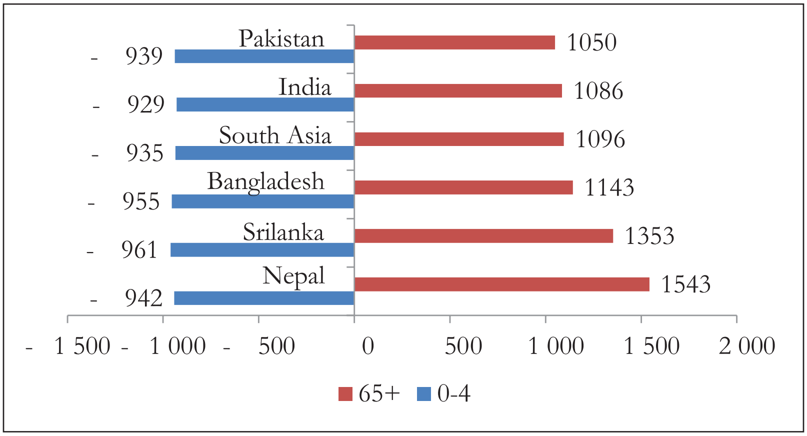

Figure 5. Comparative Differences in Sex Ratio among Children and the Elderly in South Asian Countries by the Mid-21st Century.

Source: Author's calculations derived from 2019 data published by UNDESA (2019).

Discussion

Population aging is emerging as a significant demographic phenomenon in the Indian Subcontinent, where approximately 1 in every 15 persons (around 7%) is aged 65 years and above, corresponding to over 144 million individuals in 2025. However, this regional average conceals substantial cross-country variation. For instance, Sri Lanka records the highest share of older persons (13.4%), while Afghanistan remains at a much earlier stage of aging, with only 2.9% of its population in this age group. These differences highlight the uneven pace of demographic transition across South Asia.

The dynamics of aging are further underscored by divergent growth rates between the total and elderly populations. While the general population is growing at approximately 1.2% per annum, the elderly population is expanding at a significantly higher rate of 4.2% annually. This differential implies a rapid acceleration of population aging, with projections indicating that the share of older persons in South Asia will exceed 13% by 2050. Consequently, aging is expected to become a defining demographic feature of the region within the coming decades.

Despite convergence in overall demographic patterns, considerable inter-country variation persists in aging trajectories. The gap in population aging across South Asian countries has narrowed to roughly a decade in demographic terms, reflecting partial convergence in mortality and fertility transitions. Nevertheless, disparities remain evident, particularly in old-age mortality. Life expectancy at age 65 has improved substantially over the past seven decades; however, unlike life expectancy at birth—where cross-country differences are declining—the gap in old-age life expectancy (e^{65}) has widened over time and is projected to increase further in the future.

Gender differences in longevity remain a consistent feature of demographic change in South Asia. During 2020–2025, female life expectancy is approximately 72 years compared to 69 years for males. This gender gap persists into older ages, where women are expected to live an additional 16 years beyond age 65, compared to 14 years for men. Notably, this advantage has expanded considerably over time; in 1950–1955, the female survival advantage in old age was less than one year across South Asian countries.

These mortality differentials have important implications for the sex composition of older populations. The sex ratio among the elderly already exceeds earlier estimates in several countries, notably Sri Lanka (1,364 females per 1,000 males) and Nepal (1,199 females per 1,000 males) in 2020. This trend indicates a pronounced feminization of aging, which is expected to intensify by 2050. By mid-century, women are projected to outnumber men in the older population in Nepal (by 54%), Sri Lanka (35%), Bangladesh (14%), and the broader South Asia region (around 10%). These patterns suggest that countries already experiencing advanced stages of demographic aging are also those where gender imbalances in older cohorts are most pronounced, reinforcing the need to integrate aging and gender perspectives in policy planning.

Conclusion and Policy Perspectives

The study highlights that population aging is becoming a defining demographic feature of the Indian Subcontinent, although the pace and intensity vary significantly across countries. While approximately 7% of the regional population is currently aged 65 years and above, this share is expected to rise rapidly, driven by faster growth in the elderly population compared to the total population. Persistent cross-country differentials remain evident, with early-aging countries such as Sri Lanka contrasting sharply with younger age structures in countries like

Afghanistan. The findings further demonstrate that although life expectancy has improved substantially over time, gains at older ages remain uneven and gendered, with women consistently outliving men. This has resulted in a pronounced feminization of aging, particularly in countries already further along the demographic transition. Overall, the evidence suggests that aging in South Asia is not only accelerating but also increasingly shaped by widening disparities in survival and sex composition at older ages.

To conclude, we can say that South Asia not only has 25% of the world's youth population but also is home to 16% of the elderly. Further, over 15% of the world's elderly women live in South Asian countries. The missing women case was a last-century outlook; however, with the increasing female population in old age, women outnumbered men. This is more so in the cases of Nepal, Sri Lanka, India, and so on.

In a way, this is good news for women, as they are getting additional years to live as compared to their male counterparts. However, it is essential to ask and note, "Are women living happy and fulfilling lives in these additional years?" Many of the recent scientific studies have shown that women are suffering from non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and have a poor socio-economic well-being in later life (Alam & Yadav, 2014; Alam et al., 2026; Yadav et al., 2019). Their situation further aggravates due to the changing face of the family system in the Indian Subcontinent, where elderly parents are left behind to fend for themselves (Alam & Yadav, 2014).

The rapid and uneven pace of population aging in South Asia calls for differentiated and forward-looking policy responses. Governments must prepare for a sharp increase in the elderly population, which is projected to exceed 13% by 2050, by strengthening health systems, pension coverage, and long-term care infrastructure. Given the higher growth rate of the elderly population relative to the working-age population, policies should also focus on promoting active aging, extending healthy life expectancy, and enhancing older persons' participation in the economy where feasible.

The marked feminization of aging further necessitates gender-responsive policy frameworks. With women forming a growing majority of the elderly population in countries such as Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh, targeted interventions are required to address higher risks of widowhood, economic insecurity, and dependency in old age. Strengthening social protection systems, ensuring universal access to healthcare, and developing community-based elderly care services are essential to mitigate the socioeconomic consequences of aging. Finally, integrating aging into broader development planning is critical to ensuring that demographic change supports, rather than constrains, sustainable and inclusive growth in the region.

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Note

1. In the Indian subcontinent, a person is called old once they attain the age of 60 years and above by government rules. Further, most of the government have a retirement age of 60 years. However, here we have considered the 65 years and above age cohort as older persons.

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Book Review

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Reji K. Joseph and Byungyul Park (Eds), *Reimagining India-Korea Economic Partnership: Pathways to Deeper Integration*, 2025, 118 pp., Institute for Studies in Industrial Development (ISID). ISBN: 978-81-938075-8-3 (Paperback); 978-81-938075-3-8 (e-Book)

This edited volume offers a timely blueprint for enhancing bilateral ties and global supply chain shifts. The editors frame the central puzzle that, despite the signing of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in 2009, bilateral outcomes have fallen short of expectations. As documented in the introductory chapter (pp. 1–4), India's trade deficit with Korea widened from $6 billion in 2010 to $13 billion in 2022, and Korean foreign direct investment (FDI) flows into India remained modest relative to Korea's global outward investment portfolio. The book seeks to diagnose this underperformance and articulates pathways for deeper integration.

The volume is organised into eight chapters that combine empirical analysis with forward-looking policy proposals. Chapter 2 examines trends in bilateral trade and investment. It shows product-level import surges, sectoral patterns in the FDI sector and export potential mapping. The empirical rigour, evident in the extensive use of HS 4-digit trade data, FDI disaggregation and technology-intensity classifications, provides policy recommendations in measurable terms.

Chapter 3 shifts the analytical lens to global value chains (GVCs), comparing India and Korea's participation indices and sectoral integration patterns. The chapter argues that supply chain restructuring, especially during COVID-19 and US–China trade tensions, creates an opportunity for Korea to diversify beyond China-centric production networks, while allowing India to expand its manufacturing depth amid 'China plus one risks'.

The most peculiar contribution of the book appears in Chapter 4, which proposes moving beyond CEPA towards a Korea–India analogue of the India–US Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET). This forward-looking framework recognises that contemporary economic integration revolves around technology governance, digital standards and strategic sectors, rather than tariff liberalisation alone. By linking trade policy with industrial and technology cooperation, the book advances debate beyond conventional free trade agreement (FTA)-centric approaches.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 deepen the sectoral analysis. The automotive chapter employs supply-chain mapping and comparative advantage assessments to examine resilience strategies amid rising competition from China. The hydrogen economy chapters (6 and 7) provide a comparative account of Korea's hydrogen ecosystem and India's National Green Hydrogen Mission. The emphasis on green industrialisation aligns with the emerging area of climate-linked regional integration and advocates bilateral partnership within global decarbonisation efforts.

The book is empirically grounded through tables and figures across chapters, ranging from GVC participation indices to sectoral FDI breakdowns, thereby supporting evidence-based arguments. The book is strategically contextualised within bilateral cooperation and the rise of industry policy regimes. The policy orientation is clear without diluting the analytical depth. The concluding chapter synthesises recommendations emerging from the 2024 Policy Dialogue, offering a roadmap for deepening collaboration in manufacturing, digitalisation, micro, small and medium enterprise (MSME) linkages and green technologies.

While the book excels in sectoral and policy analysis, two areas require further elaboration. First, engagement with theoretical literature on regional integration could strengthen the contribution for academicians. Concepts such as 'deep integration', 'regulatory convergence' or 'geoeconomic statecraft' are implicitly present but not systematically theorised. A strong conceptual anchoring could enhance its scholarly impact. Second, although the discussion acknowledges asymmetry, there is limited exploration of domestic political economy constraints in both countries. Issues such as regulatory uncertainty, standards compliance and institutional capacity are referenced but not deeply analysed.

This book is a timely, empirically rich and policy-relevant contribution to the literature on bilateral economic cooperation in Asia. The volume offers a roadmap for deepening India–Korea economic ties. This will interest scholars of regional integration, policymakers engaged in trade and industrial strategy and researchers examining the intersection of supply chain restructuring and green industrialisation. This monograph provides both diagnosis and direction where economic integration must be reimagined rather than merely expanded.

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