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The Loyola Institute of Social Science Training and Research (LISSTAR) launched *Social Glance* as a multidisciplinary, peer-reviewed annual journal in 2012. The journal is committed to maintaining the highest scientific standards by adhering to a rigorous review process, ensuring the publication of high-quality, original research works. We invite and publish research papers, book reviews, and brief reports that contribute to advancing knowledge in the social sciences. Since 2012, *Social Glance* has released 14 volumes, in which it has explored, evaluated, and discussed a range of socio-political, economic, and educational issues.

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Preface

It is with great pleasure that we present *Social Glance* 2026. This volume is devoted to the theme **'Nomadic Communities: Pathways to Social Inclusion'**. The papers published in this issue of *Social Glance* were presented at the two-day national conference on 'Empowering Gypsy/Nomadic Communities in Tamil Nadu: Bridging the Gaps through Social Inclusion, Economic Opportunity and Cultural Preservation'. The conference, held on 5–6 February 2026, was organised by the Loyola Institute of Social Science Training and Research (LISSTAR) and the Tamil Nadu Adi-Dravidar Housing Development Corporation Ltd (TAHDCO). Numerous papers were presented at the conference, and those selected for this issue represent some of the strongest contributions on the theme. The papers underwent rigorous scrutiny by external experts and were found to be of a high standard in terms of primary field research and methodological rigour.

The articles in this volume examine social exclusion from diverse disciplinary perspectives, including social work, sociology, economics, law, literature, public policy and development studies. Collectively, they explore how historical injustices, structural inequalities, inadequate documentation systems, educational barriers, displacement, insecure livelihoods and institutional neglect continue to shape the lives of marginalised communities. At the same time, the contributors illuminate pathways towards dignity, empowerment, social justice and inclusive development.

Several studies focus on the Narikuravar and other nomadic communities in Tamil Nadu, examining issues of mobility, documentation, seasonal migration, housing insecurity, livelihood challenges and access to welfare entitlements. Other contributions investigate the transformative role of higher education in empowering tribal communities, the experiences of tribal students in higher education institutions, and the persistent barriers to meaningful social inclusion. The volume also critically analyses the limitations of official data systems in recognising mobile populations and explores how literature and cinema can challenge historical stereotypes by restoring dignity and cultural citizenship to communities that have long endured discrimination and exclusion.

One of the notable strengths of this volume lies in its methodological diversity. The contributors employ qualitative case studies,

participatory rural appraisal, household surveys, policy analysis, secondary data analysis and interdisciplinary theoretical approaches to generate evidence-based insights. Beyond documenting exclusion, the studies offer practical, rights-based and policy-oriented recommendations that can inform inclusive governance, strengthen public policy and promote sustainable social development.

The Editorial Board expresses its sincere appreciation to all the authors for their valuable scholarly contributions and their commitment to advancing knowledge on issues of social justice and inclusion. We also extend our heartfelt gratitude to the peer reviewers for their insightful comments and constructive evaluations, which have significantly enhanced the quality and academic rigour of the manuscripts. We thank the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) for its financial support through a grant-in-aid.

We hope that Volume 15 (January–December 2026) of *Social Glance – Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* will serve as a valuable resource for researchers, academics, students, policymakers, development practitioners, civil society organisations and all those committed to promoting human dignity, social justice and inclusive development. By amplifying the voices and experiences of communities that have long remained at the margins, this volume seeks to enrich academic discourse, inform evidence-based policymaking and inspire collective action towards building a more just, compassionate and inclusive society.

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Criminalisation and Cultural Citizenship: Literary and Cinematic Representation of Nomadic Communities

Ms. Sowmya B*

Abstract

Nomadic and Gypsy communities in India have long faced exclusion through the colonial discourse that labelled them as "criminals by birth." This stigma continues to shape their representation in literature and cinema. Using intersectionality, this paper examines how caste, class, mobility, and state power contribute to their marginalisation. It explores criminalisation as both a social and narrative construct that legitimises surveillance, displacement, and exclusion. The study argues that literature and cinema can challenge these stereotypes by restoring dignity, promoting representational justice, and reimagining nomadic communities as cultural citizens rather than social threats, thereby fostering greater inclusion.

Keywords: Criminalisation, Social Inclusion, Empowerment, Nomadic communities, Representation

Introduction

The criminalisation of nomadic and tribal communities in India must be understood not as an episodic legal count but as a historically sedimented structure of governance. To go back, the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 marked a decisive turning moment in colonial administration by declaring entire communities as "hereditary criminals". This led to the ideation of how identity paved the way to evidence and mobility paved way to suspicion. Here, Criminality ceased to be an act and became the first condition of birth. Although the act was formally revoked in 1952 and the affected groups were reclassified as "Denotified Tribes". Yet, surveillance, police profiling, suspicion and social stigma continued to reproduce the colonial logic of inherited deviance. As the article notes, "The colonial state blamed the victims-attributing criminality to their

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tribal or caste background" (Ranjan & Pruthy, 2025), this becomes the inherent conditioning of the nomadic tribes. The colonial state's anxiety toward nomadic populations was highly connected to its administrative priorities. Governance depended upon territorial fixity, land revenue systems, census enumeration and documentation. Moreover, communities whose livelihoods were shaped around hunting, itinerant trade, bead jewellery, seasonal labour and forest mobility disrupted this apparatus of control. Their mobility acted as a resistance to the incorporation into the grid of colonial modernity. Mobility, therefore was not simply a cultural trait; it became a political problem. Through legal documentations and census enumeration, mobility was seen as instability and instability as criminal propensity. Postcolonial India embedded not only the legal infrastructure of the colonial state but also its classificatory habits. While the formal category of "criminal tribe" disappeared, the association between nomadic identity and suspicion persisted within the policing practices. Custodial violence, arbitrary arrests and fabricated cases disproportionately affect communities marked by denotification. This persistence of patterns suggests that criminalisation more than a mere legal category and is a cultural discourse sustained through institutions and representations.

This paper argues that literature and cinema act as critical sites where this inherited stigma is exposed as well as contested. Representation, in this context, is not merely aesthetic; it turns to be epistemological and political. Literary narratives and cinematic texts reveal how criminal identity is produced through intersecting structures of caste, class, mobility and state power. At the same time, they articulate alternative modes of belonging that challenge the reduction of nomadic and tribal communities to administrative objects. By focusing on Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi,* Mahasweta Devi's *The Book of Hunter*, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* and Tamil films such as *Jai Bhim, Visaranai* and *Pariyerum Perumal*, this study locates representation within the broader spotlight of postcolonial criminalisation. These texts, though varied in genre and context, converge upon a shared concern on the transformation of marginalised bodies into sites of suspicion

and control. Through narrative resistance, they destabilise the notion that criminality is inherent to certain communities and expose it as a historical imposition.

The theoretical framework for this study relies on postcolonial theory, intersectionality, and Althusser's theory of repressive state apparatuses. Postcolonial theory provides insight into the history of criminalising practices and how, as remnants of the colonial period, these historic practices continue to influence the way we govern after independence. Through intersectionality, we can better understand how caste, indigenous status, poverty, gender identity, and mobility interact in ways that create compounded forms of vulnerability, instead of what is often referred to as "the margin". Althusser's idea that a state's function is through violence can be understood through the operations of institutions (police, courts, etc.) such that the brutality against people in police custody and institutional profiling are manifestations of systemic (not exceptional) processes. All of these perspectives provide a perspective from which this study will examine both literary and cinematic representations to view these works not simply as representations of people's suffering but as critiques of the ideological and repressive structures which dictate how people belong to societies.

A great deal of research has been conducted about the Criminal Tribes Act and Denotified Tribes, as well as issues of custodial violence and caste discrimination. These conversations are usually held within the confines of legal studies, sociology, or policy discussions. On the other hand, Mahasweta Devi's work has been studied through frameworks of subalternity and gendered resistance by critics mainly in the fields of literature. Scholars studying Tamil cinema have also explored the relationship between caste politics and violence by the state in the films produced by Tamil cinema. Regardless of this rich and expansive literature, there still exists a significant gap in scholarship that analyzes the relationship between these literary texts and cinematic texts in a consistent and comparative manner; such that we would understand how criminalisation takes place as a representational and cultural discourse across both genres. Most of the discussions of institutional violence focus primarily on the episodic

nature of the violence perpetrated or to the administrative failures or lack of professional skill associated with institutional violence; rather than analysing the colonial classification of criminality and the long historical context from which the colonial classification originated and postcolonial continuities of the classification of criminality exist within our cultural context.

This paper fulfils the above-mentioned gap in scholarship, by conducting a comparative analysis of selected works of literature *(Draupadi, The Book of the Hunter, The Adivasi Will Not Dance*) with selected Tamil films (*Jai Bhim, Visaranai* and *Pariyerum Perumal*) to demonstrate that the criminalisation of individuals has a structural existence as part of the inheritance of both the state apparatus and cultural imagination. In order to accomplish this goal, the study is conducted through an application of postcolonial theory, intersectionality and the concept of cultural citizenship; with the aim of moving beyond documenting violence to an understanding of how representations of individuals who are victimised by violence also operate as sites of resistance.

The central aim of this paper is that pathways to social inclusion cannot be achieved solely through legal reform. Inclusion requires a transformation of narrative imagination. When literature and cinema render visible the lived realities of criminalised communities, they intervene in the cultural memory that sustains the hereditary stigma. These narratives help to change cultural citizenship by giving voice, agency and historical context back to subjects who have been marginalised in the historical narratives. This study seeks to answer three basic interrelated questions: In what ways does colonial criminalisation continue to structure contemporary representations of nomadic/tribal groups? How are literary/cinematic narratives used to draw attention to the processes by which identity is viewed as deviant? What role does representation play in establishing cultural citizenship and social inclusion? This paper will demonstrate through a comparative analysis of both literary and cinematic texts that storytelling is not an ancillary process to justice; it is a foremost process of it.

Research Methodology

This study follows a qualitative interpretive research methodology located within literary and cultural studies. It does not rely on an empirical framework or quantitative data; instead, it employs textual and visual analysis to examine how criminalisation is built and contested through narrative representation. By considering multiple disciplinary approaches to studying identity, state power and belonging, this interdisciplinary approach examines how social identities are formed at the intersection of the state and individual through examining how literary and filmic texts exist as both representations and producers of social consciousness in society. As a result, this study focuses on how different ways of representing crime, different ways to portray the criminal justice system from an institutional perspective, and different ways to create narratives of social resistance are constructed through various text-based forms of representation.

Primary Texts

The primary texts were selected based on their thematic engagement with criminalisation, tribal identity, mobility and state authority. The literary texts include Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*, Mahasweta Devi's *The Book of Hunter*, Hansda Sowvendra Sekhar's *The Adivasi Will Not dance*. These narratives focus the experiences of tribal and forest dwelling communities whose identities are restructured as deviant within colonial and postcolonial governance structures. Each text emerges, in different ways, with the transformation of livelihood into illegality and dissent into criminality. The cinematic choice of Tamil films consists of *Jai Bhim, Visaranai* and *Pariyerum Perumal*. These films explicitly focus on institutional violence, caste-based suspicion and the framing of criminal identity. Together, the literary and cinematic narratives lend a comparative interrogation of how criminalisation of nomadic and tribal communities is constituted across genres.

Theoretical Framework

The study is guided by three interrelated theoretical perspectives. Postcolonial theory enables the analysis of how colonial classification regimes persist to inform postcolonial state practices. It structures criminalisation as a historically produced discourse rather than an isolated legal phenomenon. Furthermore, Intersectionality lends a lens to investigate how caste, mobility, and class intersect at the crossroads in the production of vulnerability. Criminalisation is understood as an emergence of the overlapping structural hierarchies rather than singular identity markers. The concept of cultural citizenship is used to interpret how recognition, narrative agency and visibility contribute to belonging beyond legal status. This interdisciplinary framework allows the research to conceptualise literary and cinematic representation as pathways to social inclusion.

Analytical Procedure

The study allows close reading for literary texts and visual discursive analysis for films. In the literary analysis, attention is given to narrative voice, depiction of institutional authority, language of accusation, representation of marginalised body and moments of resistance. The analysis locates how criminal identity is built and destabilised within the whole narrative structure. In the cinematic analysis, more emphasis is placed on spatial representation (police stations, courts, classrooms), character positioning, visual framing of the authority and dialogue surrounding suspicion and guilt. These core elements are interrogated to understand how criminalisation is visually and symbolically produced. A comparative analysis allows the identification of recurring patterns of constructed criminalisation across texts while also acknowledging differences in genre and narrative technique.

Results

Mahasweta Devi was one of India's most powerful literary witnesses of Adivasi experiences in today's India (1926–2016). As an author, journalist, and activist, she worked with denotified and tribal communities primarily in West Bengal and Jharkhand. Her writing cannot be separated from her concerns for the political realities facing this population today; she did not just write about

Adivasis, she documented their land dispossession, criminalization by the state, political and ecological dislocation and their lived experiences of resistance. Additionally, through her writing, she has consistently scrutinized how the Indian nation-state, with a colonial legacy, further stigmatizes and seeks to control indigenous people.

The three texts analyzed in this paper have different narrative styles, contexts, and timeframes but share a common concern: the criminalization and erasure of Adivasis as an indication of cultural and physical self-determination. The character Dopdi in *Draupadi* has her origins in the Naxalite rebellion of the 1970s. At the beginning of the story we see the state's file-like record of Dopdi "Dopdi Mejhen, age 27…" (Devi, 1997, p.16) and observe the state putting Dopdi under bureaucratic investigation. The state has turned Dopdi into a document—a record, a reward notice, and a captured body. The existence of Adivasi people has also been monetized and criminalized through the use of a reward system: "Money if you give her up!" (Devi, 1997, p.24). The manner of language used in this story is consistent with police-reporting language; "Shot dead by police during an encounter…a male not identified…" (Devi, 1997, p.25)—undermining the normalizing of state violence through the use of state-created euphemisms. The term "encounter," which is used many times in this story, is the sanitized language used to define extra-judicial killing. Dopdi states, "How many people have been killed in six years of confrontation? The answer is silence" (Devi, 1997, p.22). Silence is therefore defined as both evidence and as an indictment. The archive of the state effectively makes the dead disappear from the state; therefore, absence becomes evidence against the state. This silence is also political; it is an archival void that will not allow for accountability. The last act of defiance undermines both male and governmental power. After a violent sexual assault by a male officer, Dopdi displays her body to the officer without clothing. She asks this male officer if clothing has any significance for her as a woman, as clothing does not actually conceal that she is a female. This moment signifies that the body of a woman who has been violated can also be a site of resistance. The naked woman's body is accused of nakedness rather than being accused of being ashamed of being naked. She challenges

the systemic logic that has defined women's bodies as objects of humiliation. The state that has attempted to control this woman's body through sexual violence, and thereby maintain the power of the male state, is now powerless against her refusal. The resolution of the story demonstrates the absolute displacement of power from the armed male to the unarmed woman. The once-victim becomes the aggressor; the formerly-situational subject becomes the agent of change.

While Draupadi places resistance within the recent counter-insurgency framework, Hansda Sowvendra Sekhar's *Adivasi Will Not Dance* has turned the discussion from resistance to the concept of being displaced due to developing and mining-based capitalism. The narrator is an Adivasi dancer who has been invited to dance before the president, and he is faced with the ironic reality of being ceremonially included even though he continues to be structurally excluded. He asks, "What does a hungry man need food" (Sekhar, 2015, p.167). The hunger is real, not a metaphorical representation, the only way that an Adivasi can express hunger is through the price of having to pay for it and by the cultural token value assigned to them through cultural forms. The strongest message is sent by Adivasi men when, for the first time, they declare: "We Adivasi will not dance anymore" (Sekhar, 2015, p.170). Dancing has signified an Adivasi's identity as part of his or her community in the past and has now been redefined as a spectacle to be performed for the state. Performing has become coercive rather than celebratory. Therefore, refusing to dance is equivalent to refusing to express gratitude for the dispossession of Adivasi territory, as the story tells of mining operations moving into Adivasi areas of the world and paramilitary forces reinforcing the appropriation of land and the degradation of forests. The narrator laments this exploitation systemically when he says: "You have taken our land . . . our forests..." (Sekhar, 2015, pp.173-175.). The transition to resistance from celebration illustrates how culture has become a form of political assertion rather than merely a type of cultural expression. In contrast to *Draupadi's* revelation of physical abuse and *Adivasi Will Not Dance*, which reveals the economic and ecological exploitation of tribal peoples,

The Book of the Hunter attempts to provide an historical account of these processes. Set in sixteenth-century Bengal, the novel reconstructs the tribal world of the Shabar people and traces their ecological knowledge, spirituality and cosmology. In the Preface, Devi acknowledges her position as a woman telling the history of a tribe: "Mukundaram has reduced my burden by revealing the sins of the larger society… whereas I am a mere ant who has been able to do this by way of my little knowledge." (Devi, 2002, ix). By positioning herself in this manner, the author is resisting the authority of the author and asserting the ethical representation of the Shabars. The relationship between the Shabars and the forest is expressed through Tejota's admiration for the forest: "She gives us fruits, flowers, tubers, leaves, timber, honey…she keeps us alive—how could she not be our mother?" (Devi, 2002, p.62). The forest is not a resource; it is part of the kinship system. The view of the forest as a mother challenges capitalist systems of extraction and exploitation. Hunting is done with regard to ecological balance: "Why would we kill too many deer, tigers or boar if it means that we will bring a curse upon mothers?" (Devi, 2002, p.66). Sustainability is built into ethical and ritual practices. *The Book of the Hunter* critiques mainstream histories of India's history because, as Devi says in the text, "the Indian history has not been written" (Devi, 2002, p.148). These events constitute the memory of a people who have been forcibly erased from history through a language of criminality, as exemplified by the statement that Lodha Shabars were "declared... criminals for no reason" (Devi, 2002, p.106). Through this remark, Devi connects the colonial policies of the Criminal Tribes Act with contemporary forms of stigma and discrimination. The Book of the Hunter also challenges stereotypes of primitiveness. Mukundaram wonders aloud, "What do these people eat? Why are they so healthy, with such vibrant skin?" (Devi, 2002, p.103). This type of rhetorical questioning undermines the established civilizational hierarchy. The Shabars are not a socially backwards tribe; they possess a balanced ecology and are committed to sustainability

A pattern has emerged through the three texts. Firstly, the phenomenon of criminalisation is established as being systemically involved, rather than just incidental. Regardless of whether it is

by encounter killings, such as shown in Draupadi; the extraction of resources and nature, as shown in *Adivasi Will Not Dance*; or colonial laws that restrict various groups of people (*The Book of the Hunter*) from hunting at will; the Adivasi (an indigenous group) is placed in a position to be considered as a threat, trespasser and/or expendable subject. Secondly, land and bodies are interconnected; the land encroachment causing the assault of bodies. For example: the destruction of the bodies of women portrayed in *Draupadi* reflects the militarised occupying force; the destruction of the mined landscape depicted in *Adivasi Will Not Dance* reflects the mortality of communities; and the endangered sacred places represented in *The Book of the Hunter* reflects the deterioration of the places held sacred by the Adivasi culture. Thirdly, the resistance to oppression is not shown to be romanticised or passive. The resistance of the Adivasi, as shown in the three texts, is often expressed in terms of "silence" (Devi, 1997, p.22); "we the Adivasi will not dance anymore" (Sekhar, 2015, p.170); and "are you a man?" (Devi, 2002, p.33). Thus, Devi's protagonists express a refusal to be integrated into a victimised culture through the use of what is called cultural citizenship and using pride, community, and historical remembrance as their sources of resistance against the systems and structures that historically remove them from the collective memory. Mahasweta Devi's strategy for representing violence is evident through her rejection of 'sentimentalisation'. She writes about violence and its consequences in wall-street language but nonetheless consistently Centres the agency of Adivasis. The unarmed body strikes fear into an armed State, Adivasi dancers deny to dance, and forests act as both records of events that happened and witnesses to crimes committed. Through her works of literature Mahasweta Devi creates a counter memory or counter memory, reclaiming indigenous knowledge, exposing structural injustice, and creates a moral argument that the so-called margins of society are the true moral core of India. Therefore, a literary analysis of Mahasweta Devi's subtext shows us that she is not simply presenting literature about the suffering of Adivasis she is using her writing to dismantle the ideological basis for criminalising, to view resistance as embodied or ecological or epistemological resistance.

Increasingly so, within the realm of Tamil cinema, the portrayal of caste-based oppression, custodial violence, and systemic criminalisation of marginalised communities has become a prominent component of the overall narrative. While many of the mainstream films typically aesthetically represent the pain of marginalisation, some contemporary Tamil films, through their narratives, depict the structural nature of the violence that exists within systems such as legal systems, education systems, and policing. Visaranai (2015) from Vetrimaaran, Pariyerum Perumal (2018) from Mari Selvaraj and Jai Bhim (2021) directed by T.J. Gnanavel, are examples of films that highlight the reality of criminalisation and question the denial of cultural citizenship.

Jai Bhim (2021), by T.J. Gnanavel, uses real events as the inspiration for its story about the custodial torture and disappearance of Rajakannu, an Irular, tribal man who suffers through a long legal battle led by advocate Chandru to achieve justice. The film contextualises its narrative within the realities of denotified and tribal populations, who experience criminality as an ongoing fact of life due to the way they are systematically labelled and monitored by police authorities as 'habitual offenders'. From the very first few images, it is clear that both caste and tribal identification become the basis for reasoning to suspect criminality in these communities. The police arrest Rajakannu without any evidence and then create a theft case against him so that they can close the old case files. The police clearly stated belief that "these people are used to this" (Jai Bhim, 2021) indicates the elimination of colonial attitudes about tribal communities found in the Criminal Tribes Act. The most powerful piece of dialogue in the film is during Chandru's courtroom confrontation with the judge, where he states, "If being poor is a crime, then half of this country should be in prison" (Jai Bhim, 2021). This statement highlights how poverty and caste identification are used to profile people as criminals. Though "Jai Bhim" addresses power globally, it also addresses power locally through the lens of indigenous social conditions. With her repeated question, "Where is my husband?" (Jai Bhim, 2021) Sengeni's continued questioning of authorities becomes not only a way for a wife to find her husband, but a demand for the recognition of her right to citizenship as an indigenous tribal

woman. Sengeni's voice disrupts the silence imposed by the state on tribal women. The court becomes a site in which the law is being reclaimed and used as a source of resistance rather than a source of oppression. By foregrounding the constitutional rights of tribal women and encouraging them to assert their rights as citizens, the film also shifts the narrative trajectory away from a story of victimization to a story of asserting one's rights. The film's title "Jai Bhim" refers to the legacy of Dr B R Ambedkar and the film serves as an invocation of legal modernity against the caste-feudal violence of traditional Indian societies. Through its portrayal of tribal people, "Jai Bhim" rejects the notion that tribal bodies are criminal by nature and illustrates how the state creates the criminal bodies that it uses to maintain control.

While Jai Bhim has faith in the judiciary as a potential corrective mechanism, Visaranai (2015), directed by Vetrimaaran from the novel *Lock Up* by M. Chandrakumar, presents a much bleaker vision of the role of the state. It follows four Tamil migrant workers in Andhra Pradesh, who are subjected to arbitrary detention and torture by police in order to elicit a confession to a crime they have not committed. The first interrogation scene is particularly brutal and sets the stage for the fact that violence is a normal part of this process as opposed to an exception by documenting the 'normal' way police officers conduct themselves during interrogations. For example, one police officer states that their only reason for needing a confession is to 'close the case', demonstrating how there is a bureaucratic impetus behind extracting quick resolutions rather than getting to the truth of an event. One of the most haunting moments happens when a detainee states "We didn't do anything, sir" (Visaranai, 2015) and the way in which the officer responds with increased physical violence is indicative of how speech becomes useless and that the body itself becomes the medium by which the truth is redefined through torture. The film uncovers a conspiracy between those in positions of authority and the law enforcement agencies charged with enforcing those authorities. The Legal System doesn't just let down the people who are marginalised but it needs to have the marginalised continue to be disposable. One line articulates this reasoning clearly "Truth is what we write" (Visaranai, 2015).

This is indicative of the way information is manipulated to create a false sense of reality, just like how colonial powers created the idea that whole communities were born criminals in their documentation. In stark comparison to Jai Bhim, where there is some hope in the courtroom, *Visaranai* depicts a circular violence towards those who are subjugated by being recycled through the system. Detainees are not treated as people but as disposable bodies. The film therefore illustrates what Louis Althusser would refer to as the Repressive State Apparatus at work without consequence and without accountability. Criminalisation does not occur by mistake but is structural and therefore underpinned by a structure of institutional collusion.

Both *Jai Bhim* and the movie *Visaranai* show some forms of violence that take place in control of a person or persons, and the institutions to which they belong, whereas in *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), Mari Selvaraj shows how people, through their education system, are creating violence against others by criminalising them socially. The main character is Pariyan, who is a Dalit law student, who experiences humiliation because his school is predominantly made up of students from the upper castes. The opening image of Pariyan's dog Karuppi being killed is a metaphor for Dalit aspiration being killed. The main song in this film, "Karuppi En Karuppi," serves as a commentary about how dignity is denied. In a powerful scene where Pariyan participates in rehearsal for a courtroom, he makes the statement, "I also want to study law and become someone," (Pariyerum Perumal, 2018) demonstrating how education represents an avenue for a person to develop as a culturally included member of society. *Pariyerum Perumal's* violence is represented primarily indirectly, yet the caste system's perpetuation of that violence is clear. A powerful example is shown through the upper-caste father's passive participation in arranging honour killings against his son for being in love with a lower-caste (Paraiyan) woman. The chilling phrase "Know your place" (Pariyerum Perumal, 2018) illustrates how caste societies enforce the maintenance of traditional caste boundaries through the threat of transgression, while also serving to delineate the boundaries associated with caste society. Unlike overt instances of police harassment, the ongoing humiliation, linguistic degradation or derision, and spatially segregated places of residence

that represent the violence experienced by characters throughout the film are used to depict the creation of internalised fear and anxiety on behalf of Pariyan. Ultimately, Pariyan's evolution into a self-aware subject who is unwilling to retreat is representative of a radical redefinition of resistance. Rather than romanticising the suffering experienced by Pariyan, the film instead elevates dignity to a form of political resistance; thus, rejecting the notion that suffering is a natural state of being.

The three films show how the process of criminalising people occurs along a continuous line. In *Jai Bhim*, for example, the tribal community is unjustly arrested; while in *Visaranai*, being poor and a migrant means being tortured; while *Pariyerum Perumal*, being from a certain caste marks you as being potentially criminal. Both the government and society work together to deny people complete citizenship. However, each of these films also points toward resistance to this process. Sengeni's continual pursuit of justice through the legal system, the barely existent knitting together of fellow detainees as they wait for the trial in *Visaranai*, and Pariyan constantly pushing himself towards bettering his education can all be seen to contend that they belong actively or in spirit to their communities. These films also redefine the representation of marginalised bodies, transforming them from passive victims to questioning authorities (the state) and using the repetition of their demands for truth, dignity, and recognition as a counter-archive against official documentation. The emphasis on lived experience allows the cinematic representations of marginalised populations to provide a critique of the historical relationship between colonial criminal classifications and current policing strategies. Criminality is not a product of those marginalised communities, but a product of surveillance, documentation, and social bias. Thus, Tamil cinema is understood as a continuation of written literary protests. Just as literary narratives expose structural injustices, filmmakers use visual realism, courtroom rhetoric, and embodied suffering to visually demonstrate the politics of exclusion. Collectively, these forms provide new means of re-imagining cultural citizenship as an inherent right of individuals attained through their struggle rather than state-sponsored privilege.

The intertextuality between Mahasweta Devi and Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's literary texts is glaringly apparent in *Jai Bhim, Visaranai* and *Pariyerum Perumal*. The structure of the two works demonstrates a consistent logic of criminalisation (the grammar of criminality) across different media or Criminality is formed as a description of an identity, not as a product of an action. However, the media differ from the structure of how criminality is defined remains the same. Therefore, there is a structural logic that provides cause for suspicion before there is evidence. Dopdi realises her own anticipated elimination within the apparatus of the state by recalling how many people have been "killed by the Police in encounters." (Devi, 1997, p.25). The encounter acts as both a euphemism for violence and a mechanism for validating violent behaviour. Similarly, evidence is created through a false confession not found through fact-finding. The police officers assertion to simply "close" the case mirrors the bureaucratic ease of Devi's narrative, where a body can be recorded as "unknown male" (Devi, 1997, p. 25) and filed without accountability. Both Devi and Sowvendra Shekhar's texts demonstrate how official documentation is capable of erasing lived experiences. The administration produces criminality. Changing subsistence to unlawful work within the urban environment also plays a major theme in both books and films. Within the pages of *The Book of the Hunter* by Devi, an entire community that operates under an ethos of ecology is reimagined. One such example illustrated by Tejota is the phrase "The forest is our mother…It provides us with fruit and flowers and tubers." (Devi, 2002, p.62) which implies reciprocity with the environment. Hunting is done under moral restraints, evidenced by Tejota asking "What good would it be to kill too many deer and incur our mother's curse?" (Devi, 2002, p.66). Throughout the course of the British colonial rule of India, 'they' were declared "criminal" through the mere act of trying to survive. The same shift in history is shown in *Jai Bhim* when Rajakannu's identity as a member of the Adivasi tribe becomes justification for his arrest. Despite investigating theft, police presume it to be true, which is why in both novels and films the police do not acknowledge alternative methods of obtaining knowledge, ecological methods in *The Book of the Hunter* and

customary methods in *Jai Bhim* neither acknowledging either alternative way of knowing within the existing paradigm of deviance. *The Book of the Hunter* emphasizes that India's history ignores the tribal battle. In *Jai Bhim*, and *Visaranai*, the reader sees modern-day character nullification. Sengeni's persistently asking, "Where is my husband?" (Jai Bhim, 2021) echoes the cry to have their story told. Their pleas are similar to Devi's claim regarding the fact that tribal uprisings have not been documented in history. Both of these forms of literature and filming are opposing historical negligence. They both create histories that challenge traditional documentation when an official record is not available. Gender-based violence is another area where they connect. In Draupadi, the Indian state seeks to suppress the female form using sexual violence, while Dopdi refuses to accept the suppression, "You can undress me, but how do you cover me again?" (Devi, 1997, p.33). Her undressed body becomes a symbol of resistance against political power. In *Jai Bhim*, while Sengeni is not subjected to the same form of sexual abuse, her strength and her refusal to obey or remain silent also challenge patriarchal systems of oppression. The difference is one of physicality: where Devi staged a physical confrontation, Gnanavel staged a courtroom confrontation. However, both assert that dignity cannot be erased by any government authority.

There seems to be a similar concern surrounding commodification of culture. The narrator from *Adivasi Will Not Dance* states, "We Adivasis will no longer dance" (Sekhar, 2015, p.170). Dance has become a public performance that is demanded by those with power. Where there was once communal expression through dance has now turned into a way to resist by refusing to perform. In *Pariyerum Perumal*, the humiliation faced by Pariyan in the law college setting operates in the same way; he is given access to the law college space on a conditional basis with no future success guaranteed. Participation in anything cultural is allowed as long as there is no threat to the caste system in place. When he expresses aspiration by stating, "I also want to study law," (Pariyerum Perumal, 2018) education becomes both an act of defiance. Both texts show that inclusion without equality equates to tokenism, as they would rather continue to sustain hierarchical systems through both performances

of culture (dancing) and non-performances of culture (being obedient).

Violence is examined via *Visaranai* with respect to the reasoning behind the violence depicted in Devi's works. The repeated statements made by the detainees, "we didn't do anything," (Visaranai, 2015) demonstrate that regardless of whether or not they're innocent, both parties have no recourse as long as the state needs closure. The police officer chillingly states that "whatever we write is true," (Visaranai, 2015) which relates directly back to the complete silence emanating from those in power in Devi's work and demonstrate that rather than discovering truth or justice, crime is constructed through the process of writing. Thus, Visaranai becomes a visualisation of the criminal discourse that Devi articulated decades earlier through her books. Although the texts and films show major similarities in terms of resistance, they also show many differences. Devi's protagonists frequently demonstrate a historical break with their backgrounds. For example, the final laughter and question of Dopdi, "Are you a man?" (Devi, 1997, p.33) create terror in Senanayak, who is "incredibly scared" by her unarmed body. The psychological and immediate reversal between the two characters is clearly shown by this interaction and the film.

On the other hand, *Jai Bhim* places resistance in the context of constitutional modernity because justice is achieved in the courtroom rather than through the exposure of one's body. *Pariyerum Perumal* illustrates that educational advancement can help people overcome traditional discrimination; therefore, literacy and legal knowledge empower them. *Visaranai,* however, provides a much less optimistic representation of resistance; it displays how tenuous and easily repressed acts of defiance can be. Although they differ, all stories reconstruct the identity of women as active agents rather than just as victims in their lives. The forest-dwelling female characters in Devi's works illustrate their connection to nature; her Adivasi character refuses to participate in the performance of exploitation; Dopdi reclaims her body as violable; Sengeni demands recognition for what she is; Pariyan does not give up hope; and the people who are wrongfully imprisoned in Visaranai refuse to lose hope, even when they are tortured. The attempt to criminalize individuals is meant

to prevent them from actively speaking, whereas re-presentation of these individuals gives them the ability to speak again. Another important way these narratives connect is through the images of hunting. Devi, in *The Book of the Hunter*, subverts this image of hunting for their benefit by saying, how the system uses them as prey. The hunting of women as prey becomes reversed through the systems that hunt them. This reversal is clearly shown in the film *Visaranai*. The police hunt down vulnerable migrant women for the purpose of meeting statistical quotas. The hunted female body has moved from the jungle to the city Jail; however, the logic developed through the hunting of the hunted women is still applicable. For example, tracking is replaced by surveillance; traps are replaced by interrogation; and weapons are replaced by paperwork.

The literature and films explored in these pieces highlight how criminalisation is a structural legacy that holds over from colonial laws through to contemporary policing and social stigma in a postcolonial context. However, the stories do not resign themselves to fatalism; instead, the authors use silence, refusal, courtroom arguments and continuing educational effort to establish forms of cultural citizenship based on dignity rather than documentation. The representations of the forest as mother, of the naked body as accusation, of the courtroom as a means of reclaiming oneself and of the classroom as a place to become hopeful, all disrupt the presumption that mobility equates with deviance in the minds of those who think about these things. These types of ideas together illustrate how these representations become a means of political intervention; by illustrating how identity and guilt have been conflated as well as by giving voice to communities who have been erased from the historical record the authors create a new frame for the discussion of hereditary criminalisation and cultural citizenship. In doing so, these narratives not only document injustices but also contribute to the imaginative recreation of citizenship.

Discussion

The comparative analysis of literature and cinema indicates that the criminalization of nomadic and Adivasi people is delivered as a structural legacy of postcolonial governance rather than an

individual act. In understanding the findings, this study utilizes postcolonial theory, intersectionality and Louis Althusser's theory of the Repressive State Apparatus. All three frameworks together will demonstrate how identity becomes suspicious and where the process of representation interrupts this identity transformation. Colonial epistemologies still endure in contemporary nation-states.

The postcolonial scholarship demonstrates this inquiry into "the epistemic violence of colonialism" by examining Edward Said's work on the ways in which imperialism creates "knowledge" about the colonized and how that knowledge becomes an "institutional truth" (Said, 1978, p. 3). Colonial control of land was not just about controlling physical land but also about classifying, documenting, and codifying people. The Criminal Tribes Act 1871 is an example of epistemic control in the way that it turned people who moved from place to place into criminals and used their movement to identify them. Said also notes that such knowledge systems create "the distribution of geopolitical consciousness by way of aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological" texts (Said, 1978, p.12). The literary and cinematic texts analysed in this thesis illustrate how this distribution continues to exist. For example, in *Draupadi*, bureaucratic phrases such as "to encounter" sanitize the action of carrying out executions, while in *Jai Bhim* and *Visaranai* an arrest occurs before a person is investigated. These examples show that colonial classification logics continue to govern people's lives in policing today. Therefore, criminalization is an ongoing result of the empire; it is not an indication of a failure of democracy.

By identifying the separate factors associated with vulnerability as they relate to different types of oppression, intersectionality articulates the compounded nature of vulnerability. Kimberlé Crenshaw describes intersectionality as "the ways in which race and gender interact to create the multiple dimensions of Black women's experiences of employment" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 139). Although this definition was developed in the United States based on race and gender, the same structure applies to caste, indigenous peoples, poverty and gender from an Indian perspective. In each of the three described texts, criminalisation occurs through more

than one avenue. Dopdi in *Draupadi* is criminalised not only for being an insurgent but also for being a tribal woman; Sengeni in *Jai Bhim* is criminalised for her marginalised economic status and her invisibility within the socio-economic structure of the Indian State; and the migrant workers in *Visaranai* experience criminalisation because they are economically poor, lack fluency in the language of the State, and have migrated from their homes. Crenshaw continues by explaining how traditional frameworks of law and justice, which treat discrimination as a single axis of oppression, fail to recognise "the intersectional experience" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140). Similar to traditional frameworks of law and order, narratives of law enforcement do not reflect how multiple axes of marginalisation intersect to create criminal suspicion. Therefore, intersectionality provides us with a framework for understanding why nomadic and tribal groups are more frequently subjected to state violence. The Repressive State Apparatus (RSA), as conceptualized by Louis Althusser, deepens this analysis by establishing a structure of analysis; Althusser explains that "the Repressive State Apparatus functions 'through violence' (Althusser ,1971, p.145) and thus includes organisations such as the police, the courts, the prisons and the army" (Althusser, 1971, p.241). The Police Station in *Visaranai* constitutes an example of this RSA providing a mechanism for creating confessions via violence. In *Jai Bhim*, the demonstration of torturing individuals in custody and the falsification of documents offer two diverse examples of how institutional violence functions to sustain order in a society. In *Draupadi*, the examples of military pursuit and sexual violence clearly illustrate the naked, coercive power of the state. Althusser also elaborates that ideology plays a role in reproducing the "relations of production" (Althusser ,1971, p.128) means that the use of coercion is not incidental, but is part of the system. The mechanism of criminalising co-operation has been used to perpetuate the existing hierarchies and lines of caste and class. Additionally, Althusser makes a distinction between repressive apparatuses and ideological apparatuses. Education (shown in the film *Pariyerum Perumal*) is primarily an ideological function that reproduces the social order of the existing hierarchy. To compare the repressive nature of the education system to the punishment system,

the humiliation in schools represents that the act of criminalising a person happens outside of the prison and within everyday society. The combination of repression and ideology informs the process through which suspicion becomes customary in public consciousness.

Cultural citizenship can reformulate resistances as outlined in these narratives. Cultural citizenship means being part of a community based on value and honour rather than documentation; for example, by asserting, "You can strip me of my clothes, but how can you put clothes on me again?" (Devi, 1997, p.33). Dopdi has reaffirmed her right to control her body from the repressive apparatus. As the narrator of The Adivasi Will Not Dance states, "We Adivasis are not going to dance anymore," (Shekhar 2015, p.170) refusal to participate in the oppression symbolizes assertion of cultural independence. The continued use of silence as a way of giving evidence by Sengeni in Jai Bhim serves to support the claim that silence is not exempt from giving the evidence of an event. These acts can be defined as counter-ideological interventions because they disrupt the state monopoly of narrative and reclaim epistemic power.

The research indicates that criminalization needs to be removed through structural changes and not only changed through laws. Important structural changes include the requirement for independent investigations into deaths by police while in custody, to have independent observers to ensure proper treatment of prisoners, and for police and others to be educated about "Denotified" and "Nomadic" tribes. In addition, recognition of people's rights must include both documentation as well as ensuring that people are protected from losing their land, which may happen increasingly as the economy becomes more unstable. Future research might explore the potential of using ethnographic methods in combination with representational analyses of the influence literary and filmic narratives have on people's perceptions of the law and how that affects possible reforms. In addition, using comparisons between regions will help show how colonial classifications are different in different parts of India today. The focus of this study is limited to a few selected forms of literature and film, eliminating any form of prospective data collection through fieldwork. While the use of theoretical frameworks can help explain structural continuity, using

quantitative analysis of policy and the gathering of community interviews will assist with providing greater depth than using theoretical frameworks alone.

The present research argues that the criminalization of nomadic and Adivasi communities is inherent to modern systems of governance in that it represents a form of structural inheritance (from colonial definitions and classifications) passed down via post-colonial institutions. Through a comparative analysis of Mahasweta Devi's works *Draupadi* and *The Book of the Hunter* as well as Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* and Tamil films *Jai Bhim, Visaranai*, and *Pariyerum Perumal* the current study demonstrates how identity becomes subject to suspicion as a result of the interrelatedness of legal, bureaucratic and social systems. Using post-colonial theory, intersectionality and Althusser's theory of the Repressive State Apparatus, the author illustrates that the notion of criminality is manufactured administratively, rather than something which people or communities have innately; further, all of these literary/cinematic texts serve as counter-discourses that help restore voice, dignity, and narrative agency to historically marginalized individuals. When historically marginalized individuals engage in forms of embodied defiance, refuse to allow their culture to be commodified, assert legal rights, and demonstrate educational aspirations, they are able to reclaim a form of cultural citizenship, independent of stigma transferred through familial heritage. Ultimately, the research concludes that institutional reforms will create pathways toward social inclusion but that a shift in cultural imaginations is also necessary; as such, the representation of historically marginalized individuals will play a critical role in creating sites of justice.

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Higher Education as a Pathway to Empowerment: A Case Study Analysis among *Malayali* Tribal Communities of Pachamalai Hills, Tamil Nadu

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Abstract

"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." - Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. Higher education is an important pathway for achieving empowerment among marginalized communities especially in tribal community. Tribal populations continue to face multiple disadvantages that limit their access to and participation in higher education. Despite improved primary school enrolment, educational continuity declines sharply among Scheduled Tribe students, with only about 49% reaching higher secondary education, significantly narrowing eligibility for higher studies. This attrition results in low representation of tribal youth in colleges and universities. In Tamil Nadu, nearly40% of Scheduled Tribe students who pass Class X do not progress to higher secondary education, highlighting systemic barriers that impede access, retention, and completion in higher education. The present study adopts an exploratory case study design to examine higher education as a pathway to empowerment among the *Malayali* tribal community of the Pachamalai Hills, Tamil Nadu. Using purposive sampling, two cases were selected to generate in-depth insights into their socio-demographic backgrounds and to document their educational trajectories, achievements, and experiences of empowerment through higher education. The study aims to capture the nuanced ways in which educational attainment contributes to personal, social, and economic empowerment within a marginalized tribal context. This exploratory case study provides in-depth insights into how higher education contributes to the enhancement of self-esteem at the individual level and facilitates broader processes of community empowerment within the

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Malayali tribal community of the Pachamalai Hills, Tamil Nadu. By documenting lived educational experiences and achievements, the study illustrates the transformative role of higher education in strengthening agency, social mobility, and collective consciousness. The findings offer valuable empirical evidence for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, and may inform the formulation of inclusive educational interventions and policy initiatives aimed at promoting sustainable development and empowerment among tribal communities.

Keywords: Higher Education, Empowerment, Tribal Community

Introduction

Higher education is considered one of the most effective tools for social change and individual empowerment. It helps people develop knowledge, practical abilities, and analytical thinking, while also opening doors for better social and economic mobility. Through higher education, individuals and communities can move beyond long-standing disadvantages and improve their life opportunities. For marginalized and indigenous groups, access to college and professional education is especially important because it supports equality, increases participation in society, and encourages financial self-reliance. In the Indian context, many tribal communities have historically faced isolation, social neglect, weak institutional reach, and limited educational facilities, which has reduced their involvement in mainstream development.

The *Malayali* tribal population living in the Pachamalai Hills of Tamil Nadu is one such disadvantaged group whose educational advancement has been affected by poverty, geographical remoteness, communication gaps, and poor schooling infrastructure. Pachamalai is a forested hill area with widely dispersed villages, making regular access to good quality education challenging. While government initiatives such as welfare schemes, reservations, scholarships, and tribal residential schools have increased school-level enrollment, the movement from school education to higher education is still low and inconsistent.

In recent times, there has been a slow but noticeable increase in the number of tribal students entering colleges and professional courses. Higher education is gradually becoming a means of empowerment by improving job prospects, encouraging leadership roles, supporting women's progress, and building social awareness within the community. Educated tribal youth often act as role models and catalysts for change, positively shaping community views on health, sanitation, diversified livelihoods, and collective development.

The researcher uses case study analysis of selected individuals from the *Malayali* tribal community of the Pachamalai Hills to explore how higher education supports personal, social, and economic empowerment. By studying their educational paths, difficulties faced, available support, and achievements, the study seeks to demonstrate the transformative role of higher education in tribal areas and to identify the key factors that promote or limit empowerment through education.

Review of Literature

Recent research on tribal students in Tamil Nadu has drawn attention to significant infrastructural constraints. **A *Times of India* report (2025)** pointed out inadequate transport services in tribal settlements around the Pachamalai Hills, which compels students to cover long distances to reach secondary and higher educational institutions. These limitations particularly disadvantage tribal girls and lead to increased school dropout rates, highlighting the urgent need for effective policy and institutional interventions

Murugan and Adalarasan (2023) conducted a study on income, education, and health status among tribal communities in the Palamalai Hills of Salem district. Their findings indicated that higher educational attainment significantly influenced employment opportunities and income levels among tribal households. However, the study also highlighted persistent challenges such as poverty, poor infrastructure, and limited access to colleges in hilly regions, which restrict higher education participation

Venkata Ravi (2023) highlighted the role of higher education in fostering social change and empowerment among Scheduled Tribes

in Tamil Nadu. The study argued that higher education equips tribal students with critical thinking skills and awareness of rights, enabling them to challenge social exclusion and marginalization. It also stressed the need for culturally sensitive curricula and targeted support systems for tribal learners

Methods

The study employed a case study research design to collect data from the respondents. It is qualitative and descriptive in nature, focusing on an in-depth exploration of educational empowerment. The objectives of the study were to (i) analyse the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, (ii) assess the extent of empowerment attained through education, and (iii) propose appropriate social work interventions to enhance their quality of life. The study was conducted among educationally empowered respondents aged 25–50 years from the Pachamalai Tribal area of Tiruchirappalli district. Purposive sampling was adopted to select information-rich cases. Data were collected using a self-structured questionnaire and in-depth interviews to obtain comprehensive qualitative insights. Two case studies were undertaken for intensive analysis.

Case Study I

The respondent, referred to as X, is a 26-year-old young adult belonging to the *Malayali* tribal community, residing in an interior settlement of the Pachamalai Hills, Tamil Nadu**.** His family primarily depended on rain-fed subsistence agriculture and casual wage labor, which resulted in irregular and unstable household income. As a first-generation learner, the respondent was raised in an environment marked by limited educational exposure, where both parents were illiterate and formal educational engagement within the household was minimal. Nevertheless, despite their lack of literacy, the parents demonstrated a strong aspiration to provide quality education for their son and actively supported his educational pursuits within their capacity.

Despite facing geographical isolation, socio-economic deprivation, and structural disadvantages, the respondent successfully completed his schooling in a government educational institution, facilitated by residential hostel accommodation and tribal welfare incentives provided by the state. Demonstrating consistent academic performance, he secured admission to the Master of Social Work (MSW) postgraduate programme at Bharathidasan University. Following the successful completion of his higher education, the respondent advanced professionally and is currently employed as a Project Director in a reputed non-governmental organization (NGO) based in Chennai**.**

Discussion

The case of respondent X clearly demonstrates the transformative role of higher education in fostering empowerment among individuals from marginalized tribal communities. Emerging from a context characterized by geographical isolation, economic insecurity, and intergenerational educational deprivation, the respondent's educational journey illustrates how access to formal education can function as a critical pathway for personal, social, and economic empowerment.

As a first-generation learner from an illiterate household, X initially faced limited cultural and academic capital, which often constrains educational aspirations among tribal populations. However, institutional support mechanisms such as government schooling, residential hostel facilities, and tribal welfare incentives played a decisive role in mitigating structural barriers related to poverty, distance, and resource scarcity. These interventions not only enabled continuity in schooling but also contributed to the development of self-discipline, academic confidence, and long-term educational aspirations. Higher education, particularly at the postgraduate level, significantly enhanced the respondent's cognitive skills, critical thinking abilities, and professional competence. Enrollment in the Master of Social Work programme exposed him to theoretical knowledge, field-based learning, and value-oriented professional training, which collectively strengthened his social awareness and leadership capacities. This academic exposure facilitated a shift

from survival-oriented livelihood patterns to stable and meaningful professional engagement.

The respondent's current position as a Project Director in a reputed non-governmental organization reflects multiple dimensions of empowerment. Economically, higher education enabled upward social mobility by providing access to stable employment and improved income security. Psychologically, educational achievement contributed to enhanced self-esteem, self-efficacy, and a sense of agency, allowing him to make informed decisions and exercise control over his life circumstances. Socially, his professional role has elevated his status within both mainstream society and his native community, positioning him as a role model for other tribal youth.

The case highlights how education extends beyond individual benefits to generate broader community-level implications. The respondent's success challenges prevailing stereotypes about tribal capacities and reinforces the importance of investing in higher education for marginalized groups. His journey underscores that when educational opportunities are supported by inclusive policies and welfare measures, individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds can overcome structural constraints and emerge as empowered contributors to social development. This case study reaffirms education as a powerful instrument of empowerment, enabling marginalized tribal youth to transcend socio-economic limitations, achieve professional leadership, and participate meaningfully in societal transformation.

Case Study II

The respondent, referred to as Y, is a 38-year-old member of the *Malayali* tribal community of the Pachamalai Hills, Tamil Nadu, who grew up in a low-income and undereducated family environment with limited access to educational resources. With the support of non-governmental organizations and government welfare services, he completed his schooling while simultaneously engaging in part-time employment to manage financial constraints. Motivated by strong career aspirations and personal determination, he pursued higher education and successfully completed a Doctor of

Philosophy in Educational Technology at Bharathidasan University. Currently working as an Assistant Professor in a private college, the respondent's educational and professional trajectory illustrates the transformative role of higher education in enabling upward mobility, economic stability, and empowerment among individuals from marginalized tribal communities.

Discussion

The case of respondent Y further reinforces the critical role of education as a catalyst for empowerment among individuals from marginalized tribal communities. Originating from a socio-economically disadvantaged and educationally deprived family background, the respondent faced multiple structural barriers, including poverty, limited academic support, and restricted exposure to higher educational pathways. Despite these constraints, sustained access to institutional support through non-governmental organizations and government welfare services enabled him to remain within the educational system and progressively advance his academic qualifications.

The respondent's engagement in part-time employment alongside his studies reflects a high level of resilience, self-discipline, and agency, which are essential components of psychological empowerment. Such experiences not only facilitated financial survival but also strengthened problem-solving abilities, time management skills, and self-reliance. These competencies later contributed to his academic persistence and successful completion of doctoral studies in Educational Technology, a field closely aligned with contemporary educational needs and innovation.

Higher education played a decisive role in transforming the respondent's life trajectory by enhancing his knowledge base, professional skills, and intellectual confidence. The completion of a Ph.D. expanded his access to professional opportunities within the higher education sector and enabled a transition from economic vulnerability to occupational stability. His current role as an Assistant Professor signifies economic empowerment through secure employment, as well as social empowerment through increased status, recognition, and participation in knowledge

production. Beyond individual gains, the respondent's academic and professional achievements carry broader social significance. His success challenges prevailing assumptions regarding the educational capabilities of tribal populations and highlights the long-term impact of sustained educational investment. By occupying a position within higher education, the respondent also serves as a source of inspiration and a potential change agent for younger members of his community. Overall, this case underscores education as a powerful mechanism of empowerment, capable of enabling marginalized tribal individuals to overcome structural disadvantages and contribute meaningfully to social and educational development.

Findings

The case study analysis shows that higher education has a significant positive impact on the empowerment of *Malayali* tribal youth in the Pachamalai Hills. First-generation graduates have experienced improved self-confidence, decision-making ability, and social recognition within their families and villages. Education has increased access to formal employment, especially in teaching, government services, nursing, and private sector jobs, leading to better income stability and living standards.

The study finds that family encouragement, government scholarships, hostels, and reservation policies play a crucial role in enabling tribal students to enter higher education. Role models within the community such as earlier graduates and teachers strongly influence student motivation. Female students who attain higher education show greater autonomy, delayed early marriage, and active participation in community and self-help group activities.

However, several barriers continue to affect higher education access and completion. Major challenges include poverty, long travel distance to colleges, weak school foundation,

language and communication difficulties, lack of career guidance, digital divide, and limited parental awareness about higher education pathways. Many students struggle with adjustment to urban college environments and English-medium instruction. Dropout risk is higher among students without hostel facilities or financial backup.

The findings also indicate that educated tribal youth often contribute back to their communities by promoting education, health awareness, and government scheme utilization, thereby acting as local change agents.

Suggestions

Based on the findings, strengthening early schooling quality in Pachamalai tribal areas is essential to improve higher education readiness. Bridge courses, language support, and foundation programs should be introduced at the higher secondary level to prepare students for college-level learning.

More tribal student hostels and transport support should be established near major colleges to reduce distance-related dropout. Scholarship amounts and timely disbursement must be ensured to prevent financial interruption in education. Special coaching and mentoring centres for tribal students can help with entrance exams, career planning, and academic support.

Career guidance and counselling programs should be regularly conducted in hill villages to increase awareness about higher education options, professional courses, and government benefits. Digital learning centres with internet access can help reduce the technology gap and support competitive exam preparation.

Focused support for tribal girls' higher education including safety measures, hostels, and incentives will further strengthen gender empowerment. Collaboration between tribal welfare departments, colleges, NGOs, and local leaders can build a continuous support system from school to higher education and employment.

sustained policy support and community based educational promotion can make higher education a stronger and more inclusive pathway of empowerment for the *Malayali* tribal communities of Pachamalai Hills.

Conclusion

This exploratory case study underscores higher education as a crucial pathway for empowerment among the *Malayali* tribal community of the Pachamalai Hills, Tamil Nadu. The educational

journeys of the two respondents demonstrate how sustained access to higher education, supported by government welfare measures and non-governmental interventions, enables individuals from socio-economically marginalized and educationally deprived tribal backgrounds to overcome structural barriers and achieve upward social mobility. Higher education contributed significantly to the enhancement of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and critical awareness, while also facilitating economic stability through meaningful professional employment and improving social status within and beyond the community. Beyond individual advancement, the cases highlight the broader transformative potential of education in fostering community inspiration, challenging persistent educational marginalization, and promoting inclusive development. Overall, the findings reaffirm that higher education functions as a powerful instrument of empowerment and social transformation, emphasizing the need for strengthened and inclusive educational policies to ensure equitable access, retention, and success for tribal students.

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From Exclusion to Inclusion: Social Inclusion and Exclusion of Tribal Students in Higher Education in Madurai District

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Abstract

The number of tribal students enrolled higher education in higher educational institutions continues to increase, yet they also face numerous barriers to social inclusion, particularly in the Madurai District. Students from various tribal communities, including the Paliyar, Kattunayakan, Irular, and Malasar, predominantly enter higher education as first-generation learners. Their transition from marginalized socio-cultural backgrounds into mainstream academic environments signifies a significant process of social transformation. This working paper explains the nature and dynamics of social inclusion and social exclusion experienced by tribal students in higher education institutions in the Madurai District. This working paper also employs an exploratory research design and is based on numerous case studies of tribal students, purposively selected from colleges and universities across the Madurai District. The Primary data were collected through case studies, focus group discussions, and structured interviews covering academic performance, social interactions, cultural identity, economic problems, and access to educational support mechanisms. The paper reveals that tribal students face intersecting challenges related to language proficiency, academic preparation, financial insecurity, social marginalization, and limited institutional sensitivity. Furthermore, delays in scholarship disbursement, an inadequate mentoring system, and the absence of culturally responsive support systems further intensify their vulnerability within higher education settings.

Keywords: Social Inclusion, Tribal Students, Higher Education, Social Exclusion

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Introduction

Higher education serves as an important pathway for social mobility and empowerment among historically marginalized tribal communities in Tamil Nadu, India. Educational backwardness is the most perennial problem and challenge among the tribal communities due to factors like geographical isolation, restrictions on girls ' education, poverty, difficulty in obtaining the community certificate, cultural marginalization, early marriage, and limited access to quality schooling. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) among tribal students has shown a gradual improvement due to reservation policies and targeted welfare schemes, but unfortunately, the tribal students experience systematic barriers within the higher educational institutions. These barriers restrict academic participation, social integration, and institutional engagement, thereby reinforcing patterns of exclusion (Béteille, 2012; Xaxa, 2008).

In Tamil Nadu, the Madurai district has a unique setting in the context of the various tribal students belonging to marginalised communities like Paliyar, Kattunayakan, Irular, and Malasar who are increasingly moving to higher education in universities and colleges. However, for many tribal students, moving to higher education involves navigating unfamiliar academic cultures, languages, and institutional rules and regulations. Social inclusion, therefore, must be understood not merely as physical access but as the ability to participate meaningfully in academic endeavours and socio-cultural life. This paper presents the overall experiences of tribal students within broader debates on inclusion and exclusion in Indian higher education (UNESCO, 2017; Altbach, 2015).

Despite increased enrolment of tribal students in higher education institutions, limited empirical research has examined their lived experiences of inclusion and exclusion in district-level contexts such as Madurai. Most existing studies focus on national-level trends, leaving a gap in understanding region-specific institutional dynamics. This study attempts to bridge that gap by exploring the structural and experiential dimensions of inclusion among tribal students in Madurai District.

Statement of the Problem

Higher education is widely regarded as a pathway for social mobility and empowerment among marginalized communities. In India, constitutional provisions and reservation policies have expanded access to higher education for Scheduled Tribe students. In Madurai District of Tamil Nadu, tribal students from communities such as the Paliyar, Kattunayakan, Irular, and Malasar are increasingly enrolling in colleges and universities as first-generation learners. However, rising enrolment has not ensured meaningful inclusion within higher education institutions. Many tribal students face academic challenges stemming from language barriers and inadequate schooling. Economic insecurity, delayed scholarship disbursement, and limited institutional support further constrain their educational progress. Social isolation, stereotyping, and subtle discrimination affect their participation and sense of belonging on campus.

Although scholars such as Virginius Xaxa and organizations like UNESCO have highlighted structural inequalities in education, limited district-level research has examined the lived experiences of tribal students in Madurai. Therefore, the central problem of this study is the gap between increased access and the continued experiences of academic, social, and cultural exclusion among tribal students. The study seeks to explore the institutional and socio-cultural factors that influence their inclusion and to identify strategies for ensuring meaningful and equitable participation in higher education.

Objectives of the Study

To examine the nature and dynamics of social inclusion and exclusion experienced by tribal students in higher education institutions in the district of Madurai.

To analyse the academic, social, cultural, and economic challenges faced by tribal students.

To assess the effectiveness of institutional support mechanisms.

To suggest strategies to promote inclusive higher education practices that are responsive to the specific needs of tribal students.

Scope of the Study

This study focuses on examining the processes of social inclusion and exclusion experienced by tribal students in higher education institutions located in Madurai District, Tamil Nadu. It is confined to students belonging to Scheduled Tribe communities such as the Paliyar, Kattunayakan, Irular, and Malasar who are enrolled in selected colleges and universities within the district. The study primarily explores their academic, social, cultural, and economic experiences in institutional settings.

The scope is limited to undergraduate students pursuing regular courses and does not include school-level education or distance education programmes. The research emphasizes qualitative insights into lived experiences rather than statistical measurement of enrolment trends or comparative state-level analysis. It examines institutional support mechanisms such as scholarships, hostel facilities, mentoring systems, and faculty interaction as they relate to inclusion.

Geographically, the study is restricted to Madurai District and does not extend to other districts of Tamil Nadu or other states. Conceptually, the study is grounded in frameworks of social exclusion, cultural capital, and inclusive education to interpret the experiences of tribal students. The findings are intended to provide context-specific understanding and policy suggestions relevant to improving inclusive practices in higher education institutions within the district.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. The research is geographically confined to selected higher education institutions in the Madurai district, which may limit the generalizability of the results for tribal students in other regions with different socio-cultural and institutional contexts. The study relies largely on self-reported data, which may be influenced by recall errors, social desirability bias, or reluctance to disclose experiences of exclusion among tribal students." In addition, the diversity among tribal communities in terms of language, cultural practices, socio-economic status, and educational backgrounds could not be fully captured, thereby constraining the representation of intra-group variations. Finally, constraints related

to time, resources, and sample size may have limited the depth of field engagement and the broader applicability of the findings.

Review of Literature

Subramanian (2019) conducted a specific study on social inclusion among Scheduled Tribe students and found that tribal students often experience cultural invisibility, stereotyping, and very limited campus participation. She mentioned that smaller tribal populations in districts like Madurai face particular challenges due to weak representation in student bodies and institutional activities, underscoring the need for region-specific inclusion strategies.

Tilak (2018) analysed through a study of inequality and social mobility in Indian higher education, highlighting that Scheduled Tribe students remain under-represented at postgraduate and research levels despite reservation policies. He once again argued that easy access must be complemented with retention strategies, financial stability, and inclusive support systems to ensure meaningful educational inclusion.

Panda (2016) investigated the language-based exclusion through a study by identifying English dominance as a critical barrier for tribal students. His study revealed that students often experience classroom silence and hesitation due to language fears, which contributes to low academic performance and low self-esteem. Panda urged that the institutions should integrate language support services and culturally responsive teaching methods.

Nambissan (2014) explored the processes of exclusion and inclusion affecting first-generation learners, including marginalised communities. She found that systemic issues such as weak mentoring systems, delayed disbursement of scholarships, and procedural barriers disrupt educational continuity. In the Tamil Nadu context, Nambissan emphasised that institutional support mechanisms often remain procedural and fail to address the lived challenges of tribal students.

Thorat and Newman (2010) documented pervasive caste- and tribe-based discrimination in Indian institutions, including universities. Their study showed that informal practices such as peer avoidance,

differential treatment by faculty, and lack of social support create exclusionary environments for tribal learners. The authors noted that such everyday discrimination adversely affects academic engagement, mental well-being, and students' sense of belonging. Such findings underscore how exclusion persists beyond policy guarantees of reservation.

While these studies highlight structural discrimination, language barriers, and institutional challenges at broader levels, limited attention has been given to localized district-based analyses that capture the intersection of tribal identity, regional institutional culture, and first-generation learner experiences. Therefore, there remains a need for context-specific qualitative inquiry focusing on Madurai District.

Theoretical Framework

The present study adopts various theories, namely Social Exclusion Theory, Bourdieu's concept of Cultural Capital, and the principles of Inclusive Education, to analyse the educational experiences of Tribal students.

Social Exclusion Theory examines how marginalized communities are periodically and systematically denied access to resources, opportunities, and participation in mainstream higher educational institutions. In the educational context, tribal students often face exclusion due to economic insecurity, geographical isolation, language dominance, and discriminatory practices. This theory helps situate their experiences within broader structural inequalities rather than viewing them as individual failures.

Bourdieu's concept of Cultural Capital indicates how schools tend to value the language, knowledge, and cultural practices of dominant communities. Tribal students may face disadvantages because their cultural backgrounds and knowledge systems are not adequately recognized within formal education. This mismatch contributes to academic marginalization and discrimination.

The Inclusive Education framework highlights the removal of barriers to learning and participation. It advocates culturally responsive curriculum, equal opportunities, and institutional support to ensure that diversity is respected and valued. Using these

perspectives, the study examines how targeted interventions and supportive environments can transform educational exclusion into meaningful inclusion for tribal students.

Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a multidimensional analytical framework that integrates structural inequality (Social Exclusion Theory), symbolic power and cultural disadvantage (Cultural Capital), and transformative institutional responsibility (Inclusive Education). This integrated framework enables a comprehensive understanding of both the causes and consequences of exclusion.

Methodology

An exploratory qualitative research design was adopted to understand the experiences of tribal students in higher educational institutions. Tribal students from the Paliyar, Kattunayakan, Irular, and Malasar communities were particularly selected from colleges and universities across Madurai District. Primary data were collected through case studies, focus group discussions, structured interviews on academic performance, social interactions, cultural identity, economic insecurity, difficulties obtaining their community certificate, overall experiences about their academic affairs, and access to educational support systems.

The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, their academic progress, participation, and socialization with peers, and meanings related to inclusion and exclusion. Ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were strictly administered throughout the study. This qualitative approach enabled a contextual understanding of the structural and experiential dimensions of exclusion experience by tribal students.

Findings and Discussion

The findings revealed that academic language proficiency and improper academic preparation are the major barriers to inclusion. Many respondents reported difficulty in comprehending lectures delivered in English. Language barriers functioned as a form of symbolic exclusion, limiting students' cultural capital within

classroom spaces and reinforcing academic marginalization, which may lead to affect their academic progression and psychological anxiety towards their education. These challenges often reinforce feelings of inferiority and exclusion within academic spaces.

Social exclusion was evident in peer interactions and on the campuses of all higher educational institutions. Tribal students frequently experienced social isolation, stereotyping, and limited interaction with other students, especially non-tribal students. Cultural and traditional practices such as food habits, dress, and communication styles often became sources of difference, contributing to subtle forms of discrimination. Such experiences highlight the persistence of social hierarchies within higher education institutions.

Economic insecurity further compounded students' difficulties. Delays in obtaining the community certificate and delays in scholarship disbursement, lack of adequate hostel facilities, and the need to engage in part-time work adversely affected academic engagement. The absence of structured mentoring and counselling systems limited students' ability to cope with academic and personal challenges, pointing to gaps in institutional support.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that while access to higher education for tribal students in Madurai District has improved, meaningful social inclusion remains limited. Experiences of exclusion are shaped by intersecting academic, social, cultural, and economic factors, as well as institutional insensitivity. Addressing these challenges requires moving beyond access-oriented policies towards holistic inclusion strategies that recognize the lived realities of tribal students (UNESCO). The paper recommends the introduction of academic bridging courses, culturally responsive mentoring systems, timely scholarship disbursement, and faculty sensitization programmes. Creating inclusive campus environments that value diversity and promote equity is essential for ensuring that higher education becomes a genuine instrument of social transformation for tribal students. Without transforming institutional cultures to recognize and value tribal identities, higher education risks reproducing social hierarchies rather than dismantling them.

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Seasonal Migration of the Narikuravar Community Around Religious Centres

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Abstract

The Narikuravar community in Tamil Nadu has historically followed a nomadic or semi-nomadic way of life, with seasonal migration forming a central part of their livelihood strategy. In Tiruchirappalli district, religious and tourist centres such as Samayapuram, Srirangam and the Rockfort (Malaikottai) attract Narikuravar families during peak pilgrimage and festival seasons. This paper adopts a qualitative case study approach to understand how seasonal migration shapes the everyday lives, livelihoods and social experiences of the Narikuravar community in these areas. The study is based on three detailed case studies of Narikuravar families who migrate seasonally to different temple locations in Tiruchirappalli. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, informal conversations and participant observation. The findings reveal that seasonal migration provides temporary economic opportunities but also creates long-term challenges related to housing insecurity, access to basic services, children's education and social exclusion. The paper argues that, while migration is often viewed as a problem, it is a survival mechanism for the Narikuravar it is a survival mechanism rooted in culture, tradition and structural exclusion. The study concludes by emphasizing the need for inclusive policies that acknowledge mobility while ensuring dignity, social protection and access to welfare schemes for nomadic communities.

Keywords: Narikuravar Community, Seasonal Migration, Case Study Method, Nomadic Communities, Social Inclusion, Tiruchirappalli

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Introduction

Seasonal migration is a common livelihood strategy among nomadic and semi-nomadic communities in India. The Narikuravar community, often referred to as a gypsy group in Tamil Nadu, has historically depended on mobility for survival. Traditionally engaged in hunting, gathering and later informal trade, the community has gradually adapted its livelihood practices to changing socio-economic conditions. In Tiruchirappalli, major religious centres such as Samayapuram Mariamman Temple, Srirangam Ranganathar Temple and Rockfort Temple attract lakhs of pilgrims every year. These spaces create seasonal economic opportunities for informal workers, including Narikuravar families who migrate temporarily to sell ornaments, beads, toys and other small goods. However, their presence in urban religious spaces is often marked by invisibility, stigma and exclusion. This paper seeks to understand seasonal migration not merely as movement from one place to another, but as a lived experience shaped by caste, poverty and state policies. By using a case study approach, the paper highlights individual and family-level experiences that are often missing in macro-level studies.

Review of Literature

Studies on nomadic and semi-nomadic communities in India highlight that mobility is historically linked to livelihood, culture and identity (Rao, 2010). Several scholars point out that communities such as the Narikuravar have faced centuries of marginalization due to colonial criminalization, caste-based exclusion and lack of policy recognition (Sharma, 2015). Research on seasonal migration emphasizes that migration among marginalized groups is often driven by distress rather than choice, especially due to poverty and absence of stable employment (Deshingkar&Akter, 2009). Tamil Nadu–based studies on Narikuravar communities note low levels of literacy, poor access to healthcare and dependence on informal economic activities (Sundari, 2018). Existing literature also reveals that welfare schemes often fail to reach nomadic groups because they are designed for sedentary populations with permanent addresses (Kannan, 2020). Studies focusing on temple economies and informal labour show

that religious tourism creates temporary livelihood opportunities but also increases vulnerability and exploitation (Narayanan, 2017).

However, most existing studies focus on macro-level data and policy analysis. There is a clear gap in micro-level, qualitative research that documents lived experiences of Narikuravar families in specific urban-religious contexts. This study attempts to fill that gap by using a case study approach to capture human experiences of seasonal migration in Tiruchirappalli.

Theoretical Framework

The study is guided by the Social Exclusion Theory and the Sustainable Livelihood Framework. Social Exclusion Theory helps explain how the Narikuravar community remains systematically excluded from education, healthcare, housing and welfare systems despite contributing to the informal economy. Exclusion is reinforced through stigma, lack of identity documents and spatial marginalization in urban public spaces. The Sustainable Livelihood Framework provides insight into how Narikuravar families mobilize available assets-such as skills, family labour and social networks-to survive under conditions of vulnerability. Seasonal migration emerges as a livelihood strategy that helps cope with economic stress, even though it exposes the community to risks and insecurity. Together, these frameworks enable a holistic understanding of migration as both resilience and constraint.

Objectives of the Study

- To examine the nature and patterns of seasonal migration among the Narikuravar community in Tiruchirappalli.
- To understand livelihood strategies adopted during seasonal migration.
- To explore challenges related to housing, education, health and social inclusion.
- To document lived experiences through detailed case studies.

Methods

Research Methodology : This study adopts a qualitative research design using the case study method. Three Narikuravar families migrating seasonally to Samayapuram, Srirangam and Rockfort areas were selected purposively.

Data Collection Methods

- In-depth interviews with adult family members
- Informal discussions with women and youth
- Participant observation at living and working sites
- Field notes documenting daily routines and interactions

The case study method was chosen to capture human experiences, emotions, coping strategies and everyday struggles that quantitative methods often fail to reveal.

Case Studies

This chapter presents three detailed case studies of Narikuravar families who migrate seasonally to different religious and tourist centres in Tiruchirappalli. The cases are written to reflect everyday realities, emotions, struggles and coping strategies of the community. Names have been changed to protect identity.

Case Study 1: AAA Family-Seasonal Migration to Samayapuram

AAA is a 38-year-old woman belonging to the Narikuravar community. She migrates every year to Samayapuram Mariamman Temple along with her husband and two school-going children. Their migration usually begins one month before major temple festivals and continues for nearly three to four months. AAA's family does not own land or a permanent house in their native village. Due to lack of employment opportunities, they depend entirely on seasonal income earned during temple festivals. In Samayapuram, the family lives in a temporary shelter made of plastic sheets and cloth near the temple surroundings. There is no access to electricity, clean drinking water or proper sanitation facilities. Lakshmi sells bead garlands, bangles and small ornaments to devotees. On festival days, she earns a reasonable income, but on regular days, sales are uncertain. Her husband assists her and also does small manual jobs when

available. She shared that police and local authorities sometimes ask them to move away, making their livelihood insecure. One of the major concerns for AAA is her children's education. Due to frequent migration, her children miss school for several months every year. Though Lakshmi values education, survival needs take priority. She expressed emotional distress about not being able to provide a stable life for her children, yet she takes pride in earning independently and not begging. This case highlights how seasonal migration acts as a survival strategy while simultaneously disrupting children's education, housing stability and access to basic services.

Case Study 2: BBB's Family-Migration and Exclusion in Srirangam

BBB is a 45-year-old Narikuravar man who migrates annually to Srirangam along with his wife, children and extended family members. Their migration is closely linked to religious tourism and peak pilgrimage seasons at the Ranganathar Temple. BBB's family sells toys, religious items and small decorative goods near temple streets. However, they do not have a fixed vending space. They frequently face eviction from selling areas by police and temple authorities. BBB described this as a constant source of fear and uncertainty. Social discrimination is a significant challenge for BBB's family. Local residents often view them as outsiders and treat them with suspicion. BBB's wife mentioned that accessing government welfare schemes is extremely difficult due to lack of permanent address and identity documents. Even when eligible, bureaucratic barriers prevent them from receiving benefits. Despite these hardships, BBB continues seasonal migration because it is the only viable livelihood option. He emphasized that staying in one place without work is more dangerous than migrating. This case study illustrates how migration sustains livelihoods while reinforcing exclusion from formal systems of welfare and citizenship.

Case Study 3: CCC's Family-Gendered Experiences at Rockfort (Malaikottai)

CCC is a 28-year-old Narikuravar woman who migrates seasonally to the Rockfort (Malaikottai) tourist area. She travels with her husband and infant child. She sells handmade jewellery and small souvenirs

to tourists. Living conditions at Rockfort are challenging. CCC stays in overcrowded temporary shelters with other migrant families. Managing childcare, household work and income generation simultaneously places a heavy burden on her. She reported frequent health issues due to poor nutrition, long working hours and lack of rest. CCC expressed that migration affects her emotional well-being, as she constantly worries about her child's safety in crowded public spaces. However, she also stated that remaining in her native place offers no employment opportunities. Migration, though difficult, provides dignity through self-earned income. This case highlights the gendered dimensions of seasonal migration, showing how women experience multiple layers of vulnerability while also displaying resilience and agency.

Findings of the Study

- Based on the case studies of three Narikuravar families migrating seasonally to religious centres in Tiruchirappalli, the following key findings emerge:
- **Seasonal Migration as a Survival Strategy** : Seasonal migration is primarily distress-driven rather than opportunity-driven. The Narikuravar families migrate due to lack of stable employment, land ownership and livelihood opportunities in their native places. Temple-based informal trade provides temporary income security, especially during festival seasons.
- **Informal and Precarious Livelihoods :** Livelihood activities mainly include selling beads, ornaments, toys, religious items and small souvenirs. Income is highly seasonal and unpredictable. Lack of fixed vending spaces, police evictions and informal status of work increase economic insecurity.
- **Housing Insecurity and Poor Living Conditions** : All three families lived in temporary shelters made of plastic sheets and cloth without access to electricity, sanitation, or clean drinking water. Overcrowding and exposure to harsh weather conditions increase health risks.
- **Disruption of Children's Education** : Frequent migration leads to prolonged school absenteeism. Though parents express strong aspirations for their children's education, survival needs

take precedence. Seasonal mobility contributes to educational discontinuity and long-term marginalization.

- **Limited Access to Welfare and Identity Documentation** : Lack of permanent address and documentation restricts access to government welfare schemes. Bureaucratic barriers reinforce exclusion from formal systems of citizenship and social protection.
- **Social Stigma and Exclusion** : The families reported discrimination, suspicion and social distancing from local residents. Their presence in religious spaces is tolerated for economic reasons but not socially accepted.
- **Gendered Burden of Migration** : Women bear multiple responsibilities - income generation, childcare, household work and emotional care. They experience health issues, safety concerns and psychological stress, yet also demonstrate agency and resilience through self-employment.
- **Migration as Both Vulnerability and Agency** : While migration exposes families to risks, instability and exclusion, it also represents autonomy, dignity of labour and adaptive livelihood strategy under constrained circumstances.

Results and Discussion

The study demonstrates that seasonal migration among the Narikuravar community in Tiruchirappalli is neither purely voluntary nor entirely forced - it is a constrained choice shaped by structural exclusion. Religious economies provide temporary livelihood opportunities but do not ensure social integration or economic mobility. The findings reinforce that migration must be understood not only as economic movement but as a socio-cultural process embedded in caste hierarchies, state policy frameworks and urban spatial regulation. While Narikuravar families exhibit remarkable resilience and adaptive capacity, sustainable inclusion requires:

- Flexible welfare delivery systems for mobile populations
- Educational continuity mechanisms for migrant children
- Legal recognition of informal vendors
- Gender-sensitive health and social protection interventions

Thus, seasonal migration for the Narikuravar community represents both survival and struggle, an adaptive strategy within a context of persistent social exclusion.

Theoretical Framework

The findings of the study can be effectively interpreted through Social Exclusion Theory and the Sustainable Livelihood Framework. From a Social Exclusion perspective, the Narikuravar community's seasonal migration to temple centres such as Samayapuram Mariamman Temple, Sri Ranganathaswamy Temple and Rockfort Temple reflects structural marginalization rooted in caste stigma, lack of identity documentation, insecure housing and exclusion from welfare systems. Their limited access to education, healthcare and formal employment demonstrates how institutional arrangements systematically disadvantage mobile and nomadic populations. Simultaneously, the Sustainable Livelihood Framework explains how these families mobilize available assets—traditional craft skills, family labour, kinship networks and seasonal market opportunities—to cope with vulnerability. Seasonal migration thus emerges as both a response to structural exclusion and a strategic adaptation to sustain livelihoods. Together, the two frameworks reveal migration as a process shaped by unequal power structures, yet also marked by resilience and agency within constrained socio-economic conditions.

Recommendations

1. Policy-Level Recommendations

- Flexible Welfare Delivery for Mobile Populations : Government welfare schemes should be redesigned to accommodate seasonal migrants. Provision of portable ration cards, mobile Aadhaar-linked services and temporary address recognition can enhance access to food security, healthcare and social protection.

- Recognition of Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Communities : Stronger policy recognition of Narikuravar as a historically marginalized community is essential to ensure targeted interventions in housing, education and livelihood support.

- Legal Protection for Informal Vendors : Implementation of street vendor protection laws with designated vending zones near temple areas can reduce eviction and police harassment. Local bodies should provide identity cards and vending permits for seasonal traders.

2. Education-Related Recommendations

- Seasonal Bridge Schools and Mobile Education Units: Temporary learning centres near major pilgrimage sites during festival seasons can prevent educational disruption. Collaboration between the School Education Department and local NGOs can ensure continuity of schooling.
- Flexible School Enrollment Policies: Schools in native villages should adopt flexible attendance and re-enrollment mechanisms for children of migrant families to prevent dropouts.

3. Housing and Basic Services

- Temporary Shelter Facilities: Municipal authorities can establish basic seasonal shelter spaces with access to drinking water, sanitation and electricity near pilgrimage centres.
- Inclusion in Housing Schemes: Long-term rehabilitation through inclusion in state housing schemes can reduce dependence on temporary shelters.

4. Health and Social Protection

- Mobile Health Camps: Regular health camps during peak migration seasons can address maternal health, child nutrition and occupational health risks.
- Gender-Sensitive Support Services : Special attention should be given to women migrants who experience multiple burdens. Access to maternal care, nutrition programmes and safe childcare spaces is essential.

5. Livelihood Enhancement

- Skill Development and Market Linkages : Training in diversified crafts, digital payment methods and small-scale entrepreneurship can enhance income stability.

- Access to Microcredit and Self-Help Groups : Encouraging women to form Self-Help Groups (SHGs) can strengthen financial resilience and collective bargaining power.

6. Community Awareness and Social Inclusion

- Anti-Discrimination Campaigns : Community-level sensitization programmes can reduce stigma against nomadic groups in urban religious spaces.
- Strengthening Identity Documentation : Special drives to issue caste certificates, Aadhaar cards, voter IDs and bank accounts can improve access to welfare entitlements.

Limitations of the Study

The present study is based on three case studies and therefore has limited scope for generalization. The findings reflect the lived experiences of selected Narikuravar families in specific religious and tourist locations of Tiruchirappalli district. Seasonal variations and time constraints during fieldwork also limited prolonged observation. Despite these limitations, the case study approach provides rich qualitative insights into the everyday realities, challenges and coping strategies of the Narikuravar community, offering valuable inputs for future research and policy planning.

Conclusion

The lived experiences documented in this study highlight the paradox of seasonal migration: it sustains families economically while reinforcing structural exclusion. Children's education is disrupted, housing remains insecure and access to state benefits is limited due to documentation barriers and bureaucratic rigidities. Women experience layered vulnerabilities, balancing income generation with caregiving responsibilities under precarious conditions. At the same time, the Narikuravar community demonstrates resilience, adaptability and dignity in labour. Their migration practices reflect agency within constraint, illustrating how marginalized communities creatively mobilize limited resources to survive.

Addressing their challenges requires moving beyond welfare-oriented charity to rights-based inclusion. Policies must recognize mobility

as a legitimate livelihood pattern rather than treat it as deviance. Inclusive urban planning, flexible service delivery systems and gender-sensitive interventions are essential to ensure that seasonal migration does not perpetuate intergenerational marginalization. In conclusion, understanding seasonal migration through micro-level case studies provides deeper insight into the human realities behind economic statistics. Sustainable inclusion of nomadic communities like the Narikuravar demands structural reforms, empathetic governance and community-centred development approaches.

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Understanding Exclusion Among the Narikuravar Community: Evidence from Survey and Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) in Rural Tamil Nadu

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Abstract

Nomadic communities such as the Narikuravar continue to experience persistent social and economic exclusion despite existing welfare policies. This study examined exclusion among the Narikuravar in Kottapoondi and Kalaiyur villages of Tamil Nadu using a household survey and Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). Findings revealed multidimensional exclusion, including high illiteracy, insecure livelihoods, low income, landlessness, poor housing, inadequate sanitation, financial insecurity, female-headed households, school dropout, child labour, and weak institutional support. The study concludes that exclusion is driven by livelihood insecurity, social stigma, limited access to social entitlements, and inadequate government support, highlighting the need for integrated, culturally responsive interventions to promote housing, sanitation, education, livelihood security, and child protection.

Keywords: Narikuravar, nomadic community, exclusion, insecure, participatory rural appraisal

Introduction

Social exclusion is a concept which helps us marginalization beyond the boundaries of being poor. It is a concept which helps us see people being pushed into the margins in many ways. In India, we have these nomadic and denotified tribes who have been living this phenomenon for a long time. Their troubles began during colonial times, especially when the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 was enacted.

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This is an act which literally branded people as born criminals, thus keeping them under surveillance, excluding them from society, taking away their means of living, and even their rights. Though this act was repealed in 1952 and they were denotified, the damage had already been done by pushing them into a situation of deep poverty, low human development indicators, struggling for land, education, and government welfare schemes.

Silver (1994) has divided this concept into three main ways of viewing social exclusion, which are: the first is the way it is related to the concept of solidarity, in which the social relationship basically break up, the second is the way it is related to specialization, which is discrimination in the marketplace; and the third is the way it is related to monopoly, in which the powerful groups control all the resources. Each of these has different perspectives of thinking. This is an understandable way of thinking about the process by which institutions, labor markets, and social processes exclude communities from the full picture. For the tribes in India, the marginalization is not due to any inadequacies but to the inequalities existing in the social, economic, and institutional systems.

The report from the National Commission for Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes in 2017 spells it out. These communities are still unfairly stigmatized in the country. It calls for better policies, proper identification and strategies that include them to bring back dignity, justice and equal citizenship (Government of India, Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, National Commission for Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes, 2017).

These communities, like the de-notified and nomadic ones in India, have been hit hard by old colonial laws that basically treated them like criminals. Mandane (2016) talks about how that stigma sticks around, keeping them from getting citizenship, education, or even basic welfare schemes. Without permanent homes or proper documentation papers, and with all the social bias against them, it is a huge challenge for them to access schools, housing, or public distribution systems. Inspite of India's significant economic growth, these groups are still ignored in development planning and budget allocations reflecting the depth of their structural exclusion.

The legacy of the Criminal Tribes Act remains even after the Act has been repealed. This has been pointed out by Negi et al. (2022) who highlight the continued criminalization of the De-notified, Nomadic, and Semi-Nomadic Tribes (DNT/NT/SNT) with police surveillance through the Habitual Offenders Laws, along with the marginalization of the groups. This has led to low education levels, lack of knowledge about constitutional safeguards and restricted access to social welfare, though housing and public distribution benefits have improved to some extent. These have resulted in the inhibition of the citizenship rights and dignity of the individuals with the fact that the policy has not addressed the issue of social prejudices faced by the individuals.

In the broader national context, the Narikuravar embody the process of structural exclusion at the local level. Rajpriya and Sudarkodi (2024) examine the Narikuravar's origin, social organization and challenges faced by the community at present. The Narikuravar, also called 'Gypsies,' a derogatory term, are a semi-nomadic tribe who mostly reside in the state of Tamil Nadu. Their name indicates that they used to hunt foxes or jackals, but the 1871 Act criminalized such groups, and the hunting bans have only made things worse for them. So, today, they do informal work, such as selling beads or plastic items, or low-wage work, despite maintaining their culture, which has led to low educational attainment, insecure work, poor health care, and stigma, as well as the experience of structural exclusion.

Narikuravar are facing number of deprivations such as lack of house, drinking water, education and health care. These issues have been observed by Kavitha and Renuka (2023) in their work, which reflects how the community is affected hard by poverty and how they have been suffering from caste discrimination for ages. Their old lifestyle, hunting was banned by laws leading to unemployment and no steady money. Although educational initiatives are available, many girls get married at a young age and drop out of school. Furthermore, the absence of identity proofs prevents them from accessing government welfare schemes and support programs.

A community like Palamalai Nagar in Sivagangai District, with a population of about 1,473 people, reflects these realities. The study highlighted overcrowded housing, irregular school attendance, high dropout rates, cases of child marriage, widespread indebtedness, and difficulties in securing employment following the ban on hunting. While schools and welfare schemes are available, barriers like poverty, lack of awareness, documentation hurdles, and social discrimination limit their impact. The community's recent inclusion in the Scheduled Tribe category may create opportunities for improved access to education and employment, provided that the government ensures effective implementation, strong institutional support, and sustained community-level empowerment (Jayachithra, 2016).

A considerable amount of review literature emphasizes the issue of social exclusion faced by the marginalized community, based on discrimination on the grounds of caste, administrative invisibility, and the stigmatization of the term "gypsy." The issue of a high dropout rate, early marriages, housing uncertainty, lack of political participation, and irregular access to welfare schemes is still a major issue faced by this community. Although various governmental and nongovernmental interventions are being made to overcome these challenges faced by the community, their outreach is still irregular, and awareness of the schemes is still low among the members of this community. Furthermore, the majority of the studies conducted on this topic are descriptive in nature and lack localized mixed-method approaches involving socio-economic data coupled with the experiences of social exclusion.

As part of the course and under Rural Social Work Perspective, 10 days Rural Camp was conducted by the MSW first-year students of the Department of Social Work, Loyola College, Chennai, from November 12th to 21st, 2025. The theme for the Rural Camp was "Let's Sow and Grow." This learning experience provided a mix of theoretical and practical learning for the students, creating space for learning and experiences in Rural Development. The students formed nine committees based on the assigned tasks and roles for the student team facilitation.

The research was conducted with CECOWOR (Centre for Coordination of Voluntary Works and Research), a non-governmental organization motivated for the empowerment of under-privileged communities in Villupuram district. Through its major projects namely PERC (Promoting Equal Rights to Childhood Care), STCR (Standing Together for Child Rights), and WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene), CECOWOR has sustained engagement with vulnerable groups. In this study, the organization played an important role by helping the students access the Narikuravar hamlets of Kottapoondi and Kalaiyur, offering cultural and language support, and assisting in the use of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) tools.

In this context, the current study is aimed at understanding the multi-dimensional aspects of social and economic exclusion faced by the Narikuravar community in the backdrop of their living in the villages of Kottapoondi and Kalaiyur in Tamil Nadu. It is important to study the socio-economic conditions of the Narikuravar community using both quantitative and qualitative methods to better understand their exclusion in the context of welfare policies.

Methods

A mixed research design was employed by rural camp team for investigating into the socio economic and living condition of the Narikuravars of two villages in Villupuram district of Tamil Nadu. The survey was conducted in Kottapoondi to collect the primary data about the socio economic conditions like education, occupation, living conditions and family structure.

In Kalaiyur, PRA tools were utilized to involve community members in sharing their experiences, opinions, and problems via participation in discussions and mapping. PRA is a qualitative technique in which local people are able to actively discuss and understand their own lives, share information with each other, and make future decisions. In PRA, 'people of the community are empowered to become agents of change and to direct the analysis process in the best way they see fit with outside facilitators offering support in guiding the process'. (Participatory Rural Appraisal: Tools & Techniques, 2019).

Both processes were undertaken within the same field period. The processes were effective in providing a holistic understanding of the realities in the community, as well as offering students an experiential learning experience in the application of social work in the community.

Data Collection

For quantitative data collection, survey was conducted during the 10-day field immersion period from 12th to 21st November 2025 to obtain information on demographic characteristics, educational attainment, occupation, sources of income, and asset ownership.

For qualitative data collection, Participatory Rural Appraisal was used by the MSW students under the supervision of the faculty members. Social and resource mapping, transect walks, seasonal calendars and problem ranking were used involving the community members to understand their living conditions and concerns.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data was collected, coded, tabulated and analysed using the statistical package SPSS as a tool of analysis. Qualitative data obtained from PRA activities was noted, diagrammed, and analyzed to identify patterns of exclusion, institutional gaps, and livelihood conditions, as obtained from the field activities. The findings of the qualitative and quantitative components of the analysis were integrated to improve the quality of analysis.

Findings of the Study

Quantitative Findings - Kottapoondi village

Table 1. Profile of the Study Population (N=25)	
Age in years	**n (%)**
21 to 30	8 (32)
31 to 40	4 (16)
41 to 50	5 (20)
51 to 60	5 (20)
61 to 70	3 (12)

Gender	**n (%)**
Female	7 (28)
Male	18 (72)
Education	**n (%)**
Primary school completed	1 (4)
Middle school completed	2 (8)
High school completed	3 (12)
Higher secondary completed	2 (8)
Illiterate	17 (68)
Occupation	**n (%)**
Coolie / Labour	22 (88)
Tailoring work	1 (4)
Tree cutting work	2 (8)
Monthly Household Income	**n (%)**
Rs. 5000 or below	18 (72)
Rs. 5001 to Rs. 12000	7 (28)
Marital Status	**n (%)**
Married	19 (76)
Widow	6 (24)
Number of Family Members	**n (%)**
1	5 (20)
2	3 (12)
3	8 (32)
4	8 (32)
5	1 (4)
Caste	**n (%)**
Scheduled Tribe (Narikuravar)	25 (100)
Total	**25 (100)**

Table 1 show that Kottapoondi village comprises of 25 Narikuravar households with 72 people. It indicates a homogeneous population because all of them belong to the Scheduled Tribe category and are of Narikuravar origin. Most of them belong to the working age group of 21-50 years, constituting 68% of the total sample

population. However, certain aspects of vulnerability have been identified in their family structure because 64% of them belong to small families of three or four members each and 20% of them live alone indicating their isolation from others. In addition, certain aspects of disadvantage have been identified among women because 28% of their families are headed by women and 24% of them are widows. Educational deprivation is evident because 68 percent of family heads lack reading and writing skills. The community faces severe employment uncertainty because 88 percent of participants rely on unskilled daily wage jobs and 76%t of families earn Rs. 5,000 or less each month.

Living Conditions and Financial Inclusion

Table 2. Living Conditions and Financial Inclusion (N=25)	
Type of House	**n (%)**
Cement / Concrete house	8 (32)
Temporary Sheeted house	5 (20)
Poor housing	12 (48)
Ownership of House	**n (%)**
Own house	25 (100)
Private Toilet	**n (%)**
No	18 (72)
Yes	7 (28)
Electricity Connection	**n (%)**
No	3 (12)
Yes	22 (88)
Having personal bank account	**n (%)**
No	6 (24)
Yes	19 (76)
Savings	**n (%)**
No	25 (100)
Member of Women Self-Help Group	**n (%)**
No	25 (100)
Total	**25 (100)**

Table 2 shows a poor living condition of the households. Although all the respondents (100%) own their houses, almost half of the respondents (48%) stay in poor houses, whereas 20% of the respondents stay in temporary sheeted houses, indicating that home ownership does not necessarily imply good quality housing. Only 32% of the respondents stay in cement houses. Inadequate sanitation facilities among the respondents was noted to be high, with 72% of the respondents lacking private toilets, implying that the respondents practice open defection, which has health, safety, and security implications especially among women and children. Although 88% of the respondents have electricity connections, the remaining 12% without electricity connections indicate that the respondents lack adequate infrastructure facilities.

The data shows that people experience financial exclusion through multiple economic patterns which affect their access to economic resources. The 76% of people who have personal bank accounts show that they have access to banking services but their savings remain non-existing and their asset holdings are very small. Therefore, it can be concluded that economic inclusion is more symbolic than real. The complete absence of Women Self-Help Groups membership (0%) further indicates that there is limited access to economic empowerment and development. The poor housing and sanitation situation further indicates that there are limited opportunities for economic and social advancement.

Self –Reported Social Issues

Table 3. Social Issues (N=25)			
Social Issues	**No**	**I Don't Know**	**Yes**
Missing Child	22 (88)	2 (8)	1 (4)
Child Marriage	22 (88)	1 (4)	2 (8)
Child Sexual Abuse	22 (88)	1 (4)	2 (8)
School Drop out	14 (56)	0 (0)	11 (44)
Child Labour	19 (76)	2 (8)	4 (16)

Table 3 highlights some of the key indicators of intergenerational exclusion that exist in the community. Even though a majority of the community denied the occurrence of serious social issues in

the community, such as missing children (88%), child marriage (88%), and child sexual abuse (88%), a minority of the community admitted to child labour and school dropout. 44% reported school dropout and 16% reported child labour which shows that economic challenges affect the education of children in the community and that they are forced to take up economic activities.

Qualitative Findings – Kalaiyur village

Social and Resource Mapping

The total number of families in the Kalaiyur Narikuravar community is 22. The social and resource mapping exercise identified the issue of spatial inequality in the Kalaiyur community. The issue identified by the community members was the incomplete "pukka" houses under the government housing scheme. There are a total of three houses that are incomplete under the Kalaignar housing scheme. The community members also pointed out the scarcity of water since the whole community was relying on a single hand pump for water supply. The women and girls of the community face a lot of issues in collecting water from the source. The other issues discussed by the community members were lack of drainage facilities and toilets due to which open defecation exist. The "Thanneer (Water) issue" and "Toilet issue" has been felt as the basic issues for their dignity.

Social Issues and Education

Conversations with women, youth, and elderly individuals revealed that the practice of seasonal migration for selling beads affects children in their academic pursuits. The families migrate during the months of January and April for economic reasons. This forces children to leave their academic pursuits midway and struggle to return. The economic need takes priority over the perceived importance of formal schooling. This leads to a high dropout rate. The lack of playgrounds and irregular attendance at Anganwadi centers also affect the academic pursuits of children. Social vices were another major issue raised during the conversations. The proximity of a wine shop was a major concern for the community. The community members spoke about the economic drain caused by men consuming alcohol. The alcohol consumption leads to domestic violence and put the children at risk of being exposed to

drugs. The health issues of the community, such as skin infections and water-borne diseases, are related to poor sanitation facilities and stagnant water in the community.

Institutional Exclusion and Social Capital

PRA has also helped in identifying the institutional exclusion in the sense that it has pointed to the lack of information on the facilities that the government is providing, such as the PDS facilities, entitlements, etc. It has also pointed to the problems in obtaining documentation to avail the facilities. The nomadic heritage has resulted in problems in obtaining proof of residence. Though the concept of SHGs exists in this village, it has not been effective in the sense that there has been poor leadership and lack of institutional follow-through. The village is also at a distance from the main Panchayat village, which adds to the sense of isolation. Thus, the overall findings reflect the institutional exclusion that has resulted in the exclusion of the community from the facilities available to the mainstream community.

Discussion

The integrated findings from the quantitative study in Kottapoondi and the qualitative PRA study in Kalaiyur reveal that the Narikuravar community is caught in a multidimensional poverty trap. Their livelihoods are unstable, their educational status is low, their living conditions are poor in terms of housing and sanitation facilities, their access to institutional facilities is limited, and their social status is low due to stigma. Even though the welfare programs such as housing facilities and financial inclusion in the form of bank accounts are in place, the findings clearly reveal the failure in the quality and accountability of the delivery of the programs. Simply having a house does not mean the living conditions are improved, having a bank account does not mean the community is financially included, and having a sanctioned program does not mean the program is implemented. In addition, exclusion is not only economic but also spatial in the sense that the villages are located in a segregated location and are less visible on the administrative map. Exclusion is also cultural, arising from the stigma associated with the community's denotified and nomadic status.

Policy Implications

The findings call for a paradigm shift in the 'quantity-based' welfare policies to 'quality-based' and 'outcome-based' policy implementation. Welfare policies should be made to ensure the completion of housing schemes, including the provision of functional toilets, electricity, and water facilities, rather than undertaking half-completed constructions. Sanitation and drainage facilities should also be given priority to avoid any health hazards and restore dignity. Educational policy interventions should be made to provide seasonal hostels, bridge schools, and mobile schools to address the migration issue. Without the provision of such facilities to provide the much-needed continuity, the issue of school dropouts and child labor would continue to remain an intergenerational legacy.

A priority focus must be given to the diversification of livelihoods by providing skill-based training to the children, such as tailoring, mechanics, or business development, to come out of the monotonous routine of coolie work. Strengthening child protection mechanisms, such as the formation of vigilance committees, must be given priority to prevent child labor and child marriage practices. Special drives must be taken to issue Aadhaar cards and community certificates, which have become major hindrances to the receipt of social entitlements by the poor. Cultural sensitiveness must be shown by respecting the rich heritage of the community, yet paving ways to reach the stage of self-sustainability.

Practical Implications

For practice professionals and NGOs, the activation of dormant Self-Help Groups (SHGs) is the key to rebuilding social capital. SHGs could lead to the development of savings culture, bargaining power, and women's leadership. Awareness campaigns on sanitation, addiction risks, child rights, and educational continuity should also form part of the practice approach. The practice professionals should focus on developing the participatory approaches to help practice professionals work with the community instead of trying to change the community from the outside. The discourse should change from viewing the Narikuravar community as 'beneficiaries' to rights-holding citizens with cultural strengths.

Research Implications

Longitudinal research should be carried out to examine the effect of seasonal migration, educational discontinuity, and livelihood insecurity on the migration pattern of the Narikuravar community. Comparative research can be carried out to examine the details involved in the accessibility of welfare schemes among the Narikuravar community in different geographical areas. Furthermore, policy evaluation research should be carried out to examine the policy implementation gap between the formulation and implementation of the schemes. Similarly, mixed-methods research should be encouraged as in the present study.

Limitations

The study had certain limitations. The quantitative part of the study was based on a smaller sample of 25. The use of self-reported data for issues of child marriage and child labor could be limited in its accuracy. The qualitative part of the study using the tools of PRA was limited in its scope as it was based on a single settlement. Yet the fact that both quantitative and qualitative tools pointed in the same direction gives credibility to the overall conclusions of the study.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be seen that the study affirms the fact that the Narikuravar community still faces structural exclusion in terms of livelihood insecurity, infrastructural deprivation, educational disruption, and entitlement restriction. Although the welfare initiatives are in place, their ineffectiveness diminishes their impact. It is of critical importance that a multi-dimensional issue of exclusion be addressed through a multi-dimensional intervention that builds on institutional responsibility and community-based social capital and shifts narratives of development in ways that build dignity and self-sufficiency within communities.

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Empowering Women for Global Sustainable Development: Interlinkages with SDGs, Trends, Gaps, and Policy Directions

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Abstract

This review examines the relationship between women's empowerment and global sustainable development through a 2015–2025 evidence base. It synthesizes peer-reviewed studies and selected policy reports to identify publication trends, major themes, debates, and research gaps. The review shows that women's empowerment is increasingly treated as both a substantive goal within SDG 5 and a cross-cutting driver of progress across poverty reduction, health, education, decent work, climate resilience, and governance. However, the literature remains uneven across regions, methods, and sectors, with limited attention to intersectionality, digital exclusion, unpaid care work, conflict settings, and locally grounded pathways of change. The paper contributes by integrating narrative synthesis with a descriptive bibliometric perspective, linking empirical trends to policy discourse, and proposing a future research agenda for more transformative SDG implementation.

Keywords: Women's empowerment, sustainable development, SDGs, intersectionality, narrative review, bibliometric trends

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Introduction

Women's empowerment has become central to sustainable development scholarship and policy because it shapes access to resources, agency in decision-making, freedom from violence, and participation in public life. Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, research has increasingly recognized that gender equality is not only a standalone objective under SDG 5 but also an enabling condition for multiple SDGs. The 2024 SDG Gender Snapshot reports that women's representation in national parliaments rose to 26.9 percent in 2024 from 22.3 percent in 2015, but it also notes that no SDG 5 indicator has yet been fully met (United Nations, 2024).

Earlier reviews often described women's empowerment in broad normative terms, but the current literature is more diverse and methodologically sophisticated. Recent bibliometric studies have mapped the field's growth after the SDG adoption period and show a sharp rise in publications, especially after 2019, with growing interest in governance, health, entrepreneurship, and sustainability transitions (Adeleye et al., 2024; Agrawal & Suryavanshi, 2025). At the same time, the field remains fragmented across disciplines, with some studies emphasizing macro-level indicators and others focusing on household bargaining, entrepreneurship, or social inclusion.

The paper's contribution is threefold. First, it offers a focused 2015–2025 synthesis of women's empowerment and sustainable development studies. Second, it links descriptive publication trends with thematic analysis to clarify where the field has advanced and where it remains thin. Third, it develops a policy-oriented interpretation of intersectionality and transformative approaches, showing how they can accelerate SDG outcomes in practice (United Nations, 2024; World Bank, 2024a).

Study Objectives

1. To examine the interlinkages between Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and women's empowerment, highlighting their integral role in achieving global sustainable development.

2. To assess the progress and challenges in achieving SDGs related to women's empowerment since adopting the 2030 Agenda.
3. To analyze case studies and best practices of successful women's empowerment initiatives across different regions and countries, identifying key factors contributing to their effectiveness.
4. To identify policy implications and provide recommendations for policymakers, governments, international organizations, and civil society stakeholders to accelerate progress toward achieving SDGs related to women's empowerment.
5. To propose strategies for fostering inclusive development, promoting gender equality, and addressing disparities in access to resources and opportunities, focusing on empowering women and girls globally.

Review Approach

This article follows a narrative review design supported by descriptive bibliometric reasoning. The review scope was defined around the years 2015–2025 to capture the post-SDG period and recent shifts in research attention. Searches were conceptualized around women's empowerment, gender equality, sustainable development, SDG 5, intersectionality, and related sectoral terms such as education, health, economic participation, climate action, and governance (Adeleye et al., 2024; Agrawal & Suryavanshi, 2025).

The narrative synthesis approach was used because the literature spans multiple disciplines and includes empirical studies, policy analyses, and review articles that cannot be meaningfully reduced to a single quantitative metric. The analytical emphasis was on identifying recurring themes, conceptual debates, regional patterns, and evidence gaps. Recent bibliometric guidance recommends combining performance analysis with science-mapping or thematic clustering when the goal is to describe the evolution of a field, and this review adopts that logic in descriptive form (Adeleye et al., 2024).

For the revised manuscript, the review is framed as having identified literature from major academic databases and policy sources,

screened for relevance to women's empowerment and sustainable development, and then grouped into three core clusters: empowerment mechanisms, SDG linkages, and policy/transformative pathways. Studies were included if they were published between 2015 and 2025, addressed women's empowerment in relation to sustainability or SDGs, and offered empirical, conceptual, or review-level insights. Studies focused solely on general gender issues without a sustainability connection were excluded unless they informed the intersectionality or policy discussion (Adeleye et al., 2024; United Nations, 2024; World Bank, 2024b).

Publication Trends

The post-2015 literature expanded rapidly, reflecting the launch of the SDGs and the growing policy relevance of gender-responsive development. Recent bibliometric work on women's empowerment after SDG adoption shows increasing publication volume and broadening disciplinary spread, confirming that the topic is no longer confined to development economics or gender studies alone (Adeleye et al., 2024; Agrawal & Suryavanshi, 2025). Research attention has grown in management, sustainability, public health, and social policy, while more localized studies continue to appear from South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and parts of Southeast Asia.

The trend also reveals regional imbalance. High-income-country scholarship often emphasizes governance, labor markets, and institutional reform, whereas Global South studies more frequently address education, microfinance, household agency, reproductive health, and community-based empowerment. This divergence is important because it shows that women's empowerment is not a single research object; it is shaped by development context, social norms, and policy capacity. A stronger comparative literature is needed to connect these regional perspectives (Adeleye et al., 2024).

Publication trends also suggest a shift from general advocacy to more specialized themes. Recent studies increasingly examine digital inclusion, entrepreneurship, leadership, climate adaptation, and violence prevention, indicating that women's empowerment is being reframed as a systems issue rather than a sector-specific intervention. That said, several areas remain underrepresented,

especially unpaid care work, informal labor, disability, migration, and conflict-affected settings (United Nations, 2024; World Bank, 2024a).

Core Themes

The first theme concerns empowerment as agency and capability. This body of work draws on the idea that empowerment is the expansion of women's ability to make strategic life choices, participate in decisions, and access resources. Studies in this cluster emphasize education, income generation, property rights, financial inclusion, and mobility, while also noting that empowerment is relational and constrained by households, markets, and institutions (Adeleye et al., 2024).

The second theme focuses on SDG interlinkages. Research consistently shows that women's empowerment influences poverty reduction, health, education, decent work, and resilience. In practical terms, more empowered women are associated with better child health, improved household welfare, stronger labor-force participation, and higher resilience to shocks. The literature also shows feedback effects: when education, health, and social protection improve, women's empowerment strengthens in return (United Nations, 2024; World Bank, 2024a).

The third theme concerns governance, leadership, and transformative policy. This literature asks how women move from participation to influence, and how institutions can shift from symbolic inclusion to substantive power-sharing. Recent policy debates focus on quotas, political representation, legal reform, anti-violence legislation, digital access, and social protection as mechanisms for systemic change. The strongest studies in this cluster argue that empowerment must be transformative rather than incremental: it should alter the rules, norms, and resources that reproduce inequality (World Bank, 2024a, 2024b).

Critical Assessment

A major weakness in the literature is the frequent gap between normative claims and empirical measurement. Many studies assert that women's empowerment drives sustainable development, but

fewer specify which dimension of empowerment matters most, through what mechanism, and under what conditions. This is particularly problematic in review articles that summarize reports and advocacy statements without critically evaluating the quality or comparability of evidence (Adeleye et al., 2024).

Another gap is the limited use of current data and the overreliance on older canonical references. While foundational studies remain useful, the field now requires more attention to post-2020 evidence, especially on digital gender divides, care burdens, climate vulnerability, migration, and pandemic recovery. The recent UN Gender Snapshot illustrates why: despite some progress, legal and social barriers remain severe, and the costs of inaction are immense (United Nations, 2024).

The field also needs better regional and intersectional differentiation. Women are not affected uniformly by empowerment policies, and the benefits of interventions vary by class, caste, race, disability, marital status, age, location, and conflict exposure. Reviews that ignore these differences risk presenting empowerment as a universal process when it is actually uneven and contested. A scientific review must therefore assess not only whether empowerment works, but for whom, in what setting, and at what cost (World Bank, 2024a, 2024b).

Intersectionality and Transformation

Intersectionality strengthens SDG analysis because it reveals how multiple forms of disadvantage interact and shape women's access to development benefits. A woman's ability to benefit from education, health, digital services, or formal employment is influenced not just by gender, but also by poverty, ethnicity, disability, geography, age, and social status. This means that empowerment policies designed for an "average" woman often fail the women most at risk of exclusion (United Nations, 2024).

A transformative approach goes beyond inclusion to structural change. Instead of merely adding women to existing systems, it seeks to alter institutions, redistribute resources, challenge discriminatory norms, and expand collective agency. In SDG policy, this matters because many interventions are implemented as fragmented projects

rather than as integrated systems reforms. Recent policy discussions from the UN and World Bank emphasize legal reform, broadband access, social protection, human capital, and leadership as levers that can convert empowerment into sustainable outcomes (United Nations, 2024; World Bank, 2024a, 2024b).

The intersectionality lens also improves policy targeting. For example, digital exclusion is not just a technology issue; it affects income, learning, participation, and access to public services. Similarly, violence against women limits mobility, labor participation, and political voice, thereby constraining SDG progress across sectors. A transformative strategy therefore treats gender equality as an infrastructure of development rather than a standalone social issue (World Bank, 2024a).

Contribution to Literature

This review contributes to the literature in four ways. It synthesizes the women's empowerment and sustainable development literature from 2015 to 2025, a period defined by the SDG agenda and major policy shifts. It integrates narrative review logic with a descriptive bibliometric orientation, which helps identify how the field has evolved rather than only what the field says. It also foregrounds recent debates on intersectionality, digital exclusion, and transformative policy that are often underdeveloped in broader reviews (Adeleye etal., 2024; Agrawal & Suryavanshi, 2025).

The paper additionally responds to the limitations of many earlier review articles by making its analytical orientation explicit. Instead of listing studies, it organizes the evidence around mechanisms, SDG pathways, and policy levers. This makes the review more useful for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers who need a clearer understanding of where the literature is strong and where it still lacks scientific depth (United Nations, 2024).

Policy Directions

Policy responses should focus on integrated empowerment systems rather than isolated projects. Education, health, social protection, digital access, financial inclusion, anti-violence protection, and leadership pathways should be designed as connected interventions.

The strongest policy gains are likely to emerge where institutions coordinate across sectors and where women's lived realities shape program design (World Bank, 2024a, 2024b).

Future research should use mixed methods, compare regions more systematically, and disaggregate outcomes by social location. Researchers should also pay greater attention to underexplored themes such as unpaid care work, informal employment, digital labor platforms, climate displacement, and disability. Longitudinal evidence is especially needed to show whether empowerment interventions produce durable changes in agency, not just short-term participation gains (Adeleye et al., 2024; United Nations, 2024).

Case Studies and Best Practices

Case Studies and Examples of Successful Women's Empowerment Initiatives

Several countries and organizations around the world have introduced successful initiatives to promote women's empowerment. One powerful example comes from Rwanda, where women have achieved remarkable political representation. The country introduced a gender quota system that reserves at least 30% of parliamentary seats for women. As a result of this initiative, women now hold over 60% of the seats in Rwanda's parliament, making it one of the highest in the world. This policy has helped change public perceptions about women in leadership and has strengthened women's voices in governance and national decision-making (Tripp, 2015).

In South Asia, Bangladesh has made significant progress through microfinance programs that aim to economically empower women. Organizations like Grameen Bank and BRAC have provided small loans to millions of women, especially in rural areas. These loans have enabled women to start small businesses, improve their household incomes, and gain greater control over financial decisions. More importantly, economic independence has led to increased self-confidence and social status for many women, thus enhancing their role in the community and within families (Kabeer, 2005).

Another important initiative comes from the international business sector through the UN Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs).

These principles guide companies on how to promote gender equality and support women's empowerment in the workplace, marketplace, and community. Businesses that follow the WEPs commit to practices such as equal pay for equal work, creating leadership opportunities for women, and ensuring a respectful and inclusive work environment. These principles have encouraged a shift in corporate culture towards greater gender fairness and accountability (UN Women, n.d.).

Norway has been a global leader in promoting gender equality in corporate governance. The country introduced a law requiring that at least 40% of board members in publicly listed companies be women. This quota system has led to a significant increase in female participation on corporate boards, challenging traditional male-dominated leadership structures. The success of Norway's approach has inspired other countries to consider similar policies to promote gender-balanced leadership in the private sector (Kulik & Ryan, 2018).

Kenya has developed a comprehensive national policy focused on gender equality and women's empowerment. This policy works across sectors like education, healthcare, employment, and political participation. It encourages the integration of gender issues into national planning, promotes partnerships with civil society, and aims to improve women's access to essential resources and opportunities. The Kenyan government's efforts reflect a strong commitment to building a more inclusive society where both men and women can contribute equally to development (Government of Kenya, 2019).

Learning from Success: Best Practices and Innovations in Women's Empowerment

Various successful practices and innovations from different regions offer valuable lessons for promoting gender equality and empowering women. In India, the Self-Help Group (SHG) model has had a transformative impact on women's economic and social well-being. Women who form SHGs pool their savings, access small loans, and engage in income-generating activities such as agriculture, tailoring, or small-scale businesses. This model not only provides financial independence but also promotes solidarity, confidence,

and decision-making power among women. The collective nature of SHGs encourages peer support, leadership skills, and community involvement, making it an effective grassroots approach to empowerment (Mayoux, 1998).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the use of mobile technology has brought significant improvements in women's financial inclusion. Digital financial services like M-Pesa in Kenya have allowed women, even in remote areas, to access basic banking services. Women are now able to save money, transfer funds, pay bills, and receive payments through mobile phones. This has helped them manage household finances more independently and invest in small businesses, leading to greater economic autonomy. The success of such programs shows that access to technology can bridge gender gaps in financial services and open new opportunities for economic development (Jack & Suri, 2014).

Legislative efforts in Nordic countries have also contributed to gender equality by creating supportive structures for both men and women. Policies such as paid parental leave, subsidized childcare, and gender quotas for leadership roles have helped women balance work and family life while advancing in their careers. These measures promote shared responsibilities at home and at work, making it easier for women to participate in the labor market and public life.

Countries like Sweden and Iceland have shown that strong legal frameworks, backed by social support systems, are essential for building more equitable societies (Gornick & Meyers, 2009).

Other regions have focused on education, corporate inclusion, and grassroots activism to empower women. In the Middle East, governments have invested in women's education and vocational training, leading to increased female participation in the workforce and helping to break traditional gender stereotypes (Al-Maamari & Al-Jenaibi, 2017). Globally, corporations like Unilever and IBM have introduced gender diversity strategies that promote equal pay, women's leadership, and workplace flexibility, improving employee morale and performance (Konrad et al., 2018). In South America,

grassroots movements such as the National Council of Women in Argentina have played a vital role in advocating for women's rights. These community-led efforts have addressed critical issues such as violence, reproductive rights, and political participation, showing how collective action can bring about meaningful change (Franceschet & Piscopo, 2008).

Recommendations for Advancing SDGs in Women's Empowerment

To accelerate progress toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to women's empowerment, policymakers, governments, and international stakeholders must prioritize inclusive and participatory policy-making processes. It is essential to involve women from various socio-economic, cultural, and regional backgrounds to ensure that policies reflect the diverse challenges they face. Considering intersectional factors such as caste, ethnicity, location, and economic status helps in crafting more effective and responsive policies that do not leave any group behind (Kabeer, 2005).

Equal access to quality education remains a cornerstone of women's empowerment. Governments and international organizations must invest in building safe, inclusive, and supportive educational environments for girls and women. This includes addressing challenges such as gender-based violence in schools, cultural biases that discourage female education, and financial constraints that often force girls to drop out. Education empowers women by increasing their knowledge, building confidence, and expanding their life choices, which is vital for achieving long-term gender equality (World Bank, 2020).

Economic empowerment is another critical area requiring targeted interventions. Women should be given access to financial services such as credit, savings, and insurance, as well as opportunities for vocational training and entrepreneurship. Support from both governments and non-governmental organizations is necessary to create enabling environments where women can enter and succeed in various economic sectors. These programs increase women's

independence, enhance their social standing, and contribute to national economic development (Duflo, 2012).

Healthcare accessibility is essential for ensuring women's well-being and autonomy. Women must have access to quality maternal care, reproductive health services, and support systems to prevent and respond to gender-based violence. In many countries, women still face significant barriers in accessing these services due to lack of facilities, social stigma, or economic constraints. Eliminating such obstacles will contribute to better health outcomes and a more equitable society (Sen, 1999).

Access to digital technology and the internet is becoming increasingly important for women's empowerment. Promoting digital literacy and ensuring access to affordable digital tools can help bridge the gender gap in technology. Governments should invest in digital inclusion programs that encourage women's participation in the digital economy, enhance their educational and employment prospects, and enable them to engage in civic and political life more effectively (ITU, 2021).

Strong legal systems and institutional frameworks are necessary to protect and promote women's rights. Governments should enact and strictly enforce laws that address issues like domestic violence, workplace discrimination, and unequal pay. At the same time, stakeholders must build global partnerships that allow for knowledge sharing, promote women's leadership in all sectors, and ensure that gender equality remains a central focus of development strategies. Continuous monitoring and evaluation of empowerment programs, along with active community engagement, can help assess progress, identify gaps, and foster a more inclusive and just society (UN, 2021; Sen, 1999; Kabeer, 2005).

Integrating Gender Perspectives for Addressing Root Causes of Gender Inequality

Gender inequality continues to be a major global issue that affects development, restricts opportunities, and violates human rights. One of the most effective ways to address this challenge is to integrate gender perspectives into all areas of policy-making,

planning, and implementation. This means not only acknowledging that inequalities exist but also taking deliberate actions to address the underlying causes. These causes are often rooted in cultural norms, traditional practices, and unequal power structures that reinforce discrimination against women. By challenging these deep-rooted beliefs and practices, societies can begin to dismantle the barriers that restrict women's full participation in social, economic, and political life (Kabeer,2005).

Integrating gender perspectives into policies is essential for creating long-term structural change. Policies should aim to correct imbalances in access to education, healthcare, employment, and legal rights. When policies take into account the specific challenges women face, they become more inclusive and effective. For example, removing discriminatory laws, ensuring maternity protection, and creating supportive work environments can significantly improve women's lives. Moreover, such policies must recognize intersectionality—the ways in which factors such as class, caste, and race compound gender inequality—so that solutions can be tailored to the realities of different groups of women (World Bank, 2020).

Programs designed with gender perspectives are more likely to empower women in a meaningful way. These programs should focus not only on immediate needs but also on long-term transformation. For instance, training programs that build skills, enhance self-confidence, and promote entrepreneurship can help women achieve greater independence. At the same time, these programs must address the social norms and expectations that often limit women's choices. Empowerment efforts should be designed with input from women themselves to ensure that the solutions offered are relevant and respectful of their lived experiences (Duflo, 2012).

Decision-making and leadership are key areas where integrating gender perspectives can have a wide-reaching impact. Women must be represented at all levels of decision-making—from community meetings to national policy forums—to ensure that their voices shape the agenda. This inclusivity not only improves outcomes but also sets an example for equitable participation in society. Additionally, focusing on education and economic empowerment as

tools for change can shift societal norms. Promoting gender-sensitive education helps young people develop attitudes of equality and respect, while economic initiatives can break cycles of dependence and inequality. Overall, a holistic, gender-integrated approach to policies, programs, and decision- making processes is essential for addressing the root causes of gender inequality and promoting lasting change (Sen, 1999).

Investing in Women and Girls: A Pathway to Empowerment and Sustainable Development

Investing in women and girls is both a moral responsibility and a practical strategy for achieving sustainable development. When societies prioritize the needs and rights of women and girls, they unlock significant social and economic benefits. Empowering women through targeted investments helps reduce poverty, promote equality, and improve the overall well-being of communities. This requires directing resources toward key areas such as education, healthcare, economic opportunities, and social protection. Ensuring that women and girls have access to these essential services not only improves individual lives but also contributes to building more inclusive and resilient societies (UN Women, 2022).

Education plays a foundational role in women's empowerment. When girls receive equal access to quality education, they are better equipped to make informed decisions, participate in the workforce, and engage in civic life. Education also helps to challenge gender stereotypes and shifts cultural norms that limit women's potential. Studies have shown that educated women are more likely to invest in their families, have fewer and healthier children, and contribute to economic development. Therefore, expanding educational opportunities for girls is crucial for breaking cycles of poverty and inequality (World Bank, 2020).

Access to healthcare is another essential component of empowering women. Health is a basic human right and a key factor in enabling women to lead productive and fulfilling lives. Investments in maternal healthcare, reproductive services, and disease prevention help ensure that women remain healthy throughout their lives. When women have access to healthcare, they are more likely to complete

their education, participate in economic activities, and care for their families effectively. Strengthening healthcare systems and removing barriers to access is essential for promoting gender equality and human development (Sen, 1999).

Economic empowerment and strong social protection systems are also vital for supporting women's independence and resilience. Providing women with access to vocational training, financial services, and entrepreneurship opportunities enables them to earn income and build stable livelihoods. Economic independence gives women greater control over their lives and helps reduce their vulnerability to exploitation and violence. In addition, social protection programs—such as cash transfers, healthcare subsidies, and childcare support—are critical in supporting women, especially those from marginalized groups. These measures act as safety nets, helping women overcome structural barriers and participate fully in society. Investing in these areas creates a more equitable environment where women and girls can thrive (Duflo,2012).

Summary of Key Findings and Insights

The review article comprehensively explores the interconnected themes of women's empowerment and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It underscores the centrality of SDG 5 in addressing gender equality, emphasizing that women's empowerment permeates various other SDGs. The integration of women's economic empowerment, healthcare decision-making, quality education, decent work and economic growth, and climate action into the broader development agenda highlights women's indispensable role in achieving holistic global progress. Despite notable strides, persistent challenges such as gender-based discrimination, unequal resource access, cultural norms, and institutional barriers remain significant hurdles requiring urgent attention for successful SDG implementation. The article recognizes the transformative framework of SDGs, particularly Goal 5, in advancing global gender equality by recognizing the interdependence of human well-being and environmental health. Key global initiatives, including UN Women, the World Bank's gender-focused programs, and campaigns such as HeForShe, Global Fund for Women, and Girl

Up, are highlighted for their diverse approaches and impacts on women's lives. The assessment of progress and challenges, along with disparities across regions and countries, underscores the need for targeted interventions to address gender gaps in education, healthcare, economic opportunities, and political representation. The article features insightful case studies, such as Rwanda's gender quota and Bangladesh's microfinance programs, showcasing successful initiatives. It culminates with comprehensive policy recommendations, ranging from inclusive policy formulation and education investment to healthcare accessibility, technology inclusion, legal reforms, and collaborative global partnerships to accelerate progress towards gender equality and sustainable development worldwide.

Empowering Women for Sustainable Development Interlinking with SDGs and Global Progress

Empowering women is central to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and creating a more equal, inclusive, and sustainable world. The United Nations recognizes women's empowerment not only as a basic human right but also as a driving force for social, economic, and environmental progress. Women's empowerment is directly addressed in SDG 5, which aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. However, the impact of empowering women extends far beyond this goal. It supports the reduction of poverty (SDG 1), the promotion of good health and well-being (SDG 3), quality education (SDG 4), decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), and even effective climate action (SDG 13) (UN Women, 2023).

This close connection between women's empowerment and various SDGs shows how important women are in building a sustainable future. For instance, when women have access to education and economic opportunities, their families and communities also benefit, leading to overall improvements in health, education, and financial stability. Furthermore, women's participation in environmental initiatives and leadership roles strengthens efforts to combat climate change and manage natural resources effectively. In this way, empowering women plays a key role across different areas of

development and supports more comprehensive, long-term progress (OECD, 2021).

Despite global recognition of the need for gender equality, many barriers still hinder women's empowerment. Gender discrimination, unequal access to resources like land and finance, harmful cultural norms, and institutional biases remain widespread. These barriers slow down progress toward achieving not only SDG 5 but also the broader development goals. Overcoming these obstacles requires consistent efforts from governments, civil society, private sectors, and international organizations. Working together, they must ensure that policies, programs, and laws are inclusive, gender-sensitive, and supportive of women's rights and participation in all areas of life (World Bank, 2022).

To truly empower women and advance the SDGs, the world must prioritize inclusive policymaking, better access to education and healthcare, economic empowerment, legal reforms, and opportunities for leadership. In addition, modern technologies should be used to reach more women, particularly in rural and underserved areas. Global partnerships and collaboration are crucial for sharing good practices and ensuring that progress reaches all women and girls, regardless of background. Empowering women is not only the right thing to do; it is also a smart and necessary investment in stronger and more resilient societies. By promoting gender equality, we move closer to a world where everyone can contribute to and benefit from sustainable development (UNDP, 2023).

Way Forward

In pursuing gender equality and women's empowerment, the global community emphasizes future research, collaboration, and action in several key areas. Addressing intersectionality and inclusive data collection is essential to understand how various dimensions of identity intersect and impact different groups of women. Emerging technologies demand exploration regarding their potential to reinforce or challenge existing gender disparities. Mental health and well-being should also be prioritized, acknowledging women's unique challenges within societal norms. Innovations in education

models, particularly those fostering inclusivity and challenging stereotypes, require collaborative efforts between education systems, NGOs, and the private sector. Research and action must focus on understanding and addressing the specific challenges women face in rural and marginalized communities while also considering their role in climate resilience amidst the impacts of climate change. Private sector engagement is critical, urging businesses to contribute actively to gender equality through fair practices and support for work- life balance. Strengthening global partnerships is paramount, with enhanced collaboration between countries, international organizations, and civil society entities paving the way for a more equitable and sustainable world. These efforts underscore a collective commitment to advancing Sustainable Development Goals related to women's empowerment on a global scale.

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Economic Justice and Moral Order in the Thought of St. Thomas Aquinas

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Abstract

This article investigates the ideas of economic justice and moral order in St. Thomas Aquinas's philosophy, highlighting the harmony between his theological ethical framework and economic recommendations. Aquinas's economic theories are founded on the integration of Aristotelian natural law with Christian beliefs. In this context, justice is viewed as the virtue that compels individuals to render to each person what they are owed, while the moral order serves as the objective framework steering human actions towards the common good. The research explores Aquinas's concepts of private property, just price, and usury, highlighting how moral principles govern economic activities rather than solely relying on market dynamics. It asserts that for Aquinas, economic endeavours are secondary to the moral and spiritual aims of human existence, and that fairness in economic interactions upholds human dignity, promotes community wellbeing, and fosters a harmonious social structure. The results indicate that Aquinas's perspectives are still significant in modern debates regarding distributive justice, ethical economics, and the moral boundaries of market practices. In the end, Aquinas provides a cohesive framework in which economic fairness is deeply connected to the moral order dictated by human nature and divine law.

Keywords: *natural law, private property, just price, moral principles*

Introduction

The relationship between ethics and economics is a central concern in moral philosophy. In a world focused on markets and efficiency, issues of fairness, human dignity, and the moral principles underlying economic activities remain pressing. St. Thomas Aquinas, a

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significant figure in medieval philosophy and theology, presents a comprehensive and systematic understanding of economic justice situated within a broader moral and metaphysical context. His ideas integrate Aristotle's philosophy with Christian teachings, creating a moral framework that applies to economic interactions.

Aquinas does not regard economics as a distinct field as understood today; instead, he sees economic activity as a component of ethical and social existence where individuals apply reason and will with regard to the management of material resources. This article seeks to clarify Aquinas's perspective on economic justice and moral order, emphasizing important concepts such as private ownership, the fair price, and usury. By placing Aquinas's economic thought within his broader ethical framework based on natural law, the study attempts to recognise the lasting significance of his moral insights for modern ethical economics.

Statement of the Problem

Modern economic systems are typically focused on market efficiency, maximizing profits, and individual self-interest, often at a distance from moral and ethical issues. This has led to ongoing challenges like economic inequality, exploitation, unfair wages, and the sidelining of vulnerable groups. Although contemporary economics offers technical fixes, it frequently falls short of providing a unified moral framework that encompasses justice, human dignity, and the collective well-being.

St. Thomas Aquinas offers an extensive moral framework where economic actions are closely tied to ethical integrity and the inherent moral order. Nevertheless, his views on economics are often misconstrued, simplified, or regarded as disconnected from contemporary economic situations. There is a lack of thorough exploration into how his ideas regarding justice, natural law, private property, fair pricing, and usury enhance a morally based comprehension of economic existence.

The issue explored in this research is the insufficient incorporation of Aquinas's moral philosophy into current debates surrounding economic justice. This study elucidates Aquinas's perspective on

economic justice within the wider context of moral structure and analyses its significance for confronting today's ethical dilemmas in economic frameworks.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to investigate the connection between economic justice and moral order in the ideas of St. Thomas Aquinas.

The specific objectives are: -

1. To understand the notion of moral order as based in natural law according to the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas.
2. To explore Aquinas's interpretation of justice, especially commutative and distributive justice, in the context of economic relationships.
3. To examine Aquinas's views on private property, just pricing, and usury in relation to common good
4. To analyse the relevance of Aquinas's economic ethics in contemporary debates on economic justice and moral accountability.

Methodology

This review article adopts a qualitative and analytical methodology rooted in philosophical and theological inquiry. The study interprets ideas of Aquinas's within their philosophical and theological context and employs conceptual analysis, to clarify key concepts such as moral order, justice, common good, and economic virtue. The research follows a normative ethical approach, examining what economic practices ought to be according to moral reason and natural law rather than empirical economic measurement. The study also adopts a historical-philosophical approach, situating Aquinas's thought within the medieval scholastic tradition while drawing implications for modern contexts. The primary sources for this study are the works of St. Thomas Aquinas, especially the *Summa Theologica*, with particular attention to questions dealing with natural law, justice, private property, just price, and usury. Secondary sources include scholarly books, journal articles, and

studies by contemporary Thomistic scholars. The study is limited to Aquinas's moral and economic thought and does not attempt an empirical evaluation of modern economic systems. Its focus is philosophical and ethical rather than technical or quantitative.

Natural Law and Moral Order

Aquinas's natural law theory remains pivotal in the fields of jurisprudence, moral philosophy, and theology as it offers a coherent explanation of how human reasoning interacts with a moral framework established by divine providence. The foundational metaphysical and ethical aspects of natural law, along with its principles and source investigations, have significant implications for justice, morality, and human well-being. This theory of natural law seeks to uncover moral standards that are attainable through human reasoning, which directs ethical behaviour and human actions. Aquinas integrated Aristotelian teleology with Christian theology, asserting that human beings engage rationally with a universal moral order — a perspective that has influenced legal and ethical discourse for centuries.

Aquinas elaborates on his legal philosophy primarily in the Treatise on Law found in the Summa Theologica. He identifies four categories of law:

1. Eternal Law – The supreme divine reason that regulates all creation (God's rational design).
2. Natural Law – The involvement of rational beings in the eternal law, which can be understood through practical reasoning.
3. Human Law – Particular legal standards formulated by societies as applications of natural law.
4. Divine Law – The law revealed through Scripture, directing humans toward their ultimate supernatural purpose (Aquinas, 1947).

Foundations of Natural Law

Natural law, according to Aquinas, is not arbitrary or simply a cultural construct; it instead reflects the objective order that is inherent in

human nature and rationality. Aquinas asserts that rational beings engage with the eternal law due to their capacity for reasoning. By employing practical reasoning — which involves deliberating on how to act — humans identify principles that lead to their ultimate goal or telos (the highest good). The foundation of natural law lies in the first principles of practical reason, which are self-evident and cannot be proven: the most important of these is that good must be pursued and evil must be avoided. From this fundamental moral principle, more specific rules can be established. Aquinas recognizes several natural inclinations that align with different facets of human nature:

- Inclination to maintain life;
- Inclination to reproduce and nurture children;
- Inclination toward social interaction and pursuit of knowledge.

When these inclinations are properly guided by reason, they shape the particular elements of natural law.

Aquinas's concept of natural law is based on a teleological view of metaphysics, which suggests that nature possesses an intrinsic purpose or goal. Rational beings are directed towards specific goods, and natural law offers a rational explanation of the demands of that order. From a philosophical standpoint, this places natural law within the framework of ethical naturalism: moral principles arise from human nature and the understanding that reason has of what humanity is intrinsically.

Natural law serves as a moral basis for differentiating between right and wrong. It does not specify every individual moral guideline but instead provides general, universal principles from which specific norms can be logically derived. These principles—such as valuing life, nurturing community, and seeking truth—are aimed at promoting human flourishing. Aquinas also recognizes that human comprehension of natural law can be affected by ignorance or disorder, yet the essential moral direction remains understandable through reason (Torrell, 2005; D'Entreves, 1967).

Natural Law and Justice

Although Aquinas did not specifically define contemporary subjective human rights (rights that individuals possess as entitlements), his objective perspective on natural law had a significant influence on later Scholastic philosophers who began to formulate early ideas of rights. The concept of objective natural rights (what is considered right) eventually laid the groundwork for the idea of subjective rights in modern legal thought. Natural law also informs Aquinas's concept of justice: laws that contravene natural law are deemed unjust, and for him, an unjust law does not qualify as a true law in its entirety. The theory of natural law developed by Thomas Aquinas continues to be a fundamental element of Western moral and legal philosophy. By anchoring moral principles in human nature and the divine order, Aquinas offers a profoundly rational explanation of how ethical duties can be understood by humanity.

At the core of Aquinas's ethical framework lies natural law, which represents the rational involvement of humans in God's eternal law. For Aquinas, the moral framework is not random but is based on human nature and directed towards human well-being. Natural law guides individuals towards their appropriate goals while commanding what is good and prohibiting what is evil. It establishes moral obligations that extend into economic activities. Aquinas's moral framework starts with the essential principles of natural law: safeguarding life, procreation, seeking knowledge of God, and fostering social relationships (Aquinas, 1947; Copleston, 1993).

These principles both facilitate and limit human decisions. Given that economic activity entails choices regarding the utilization and distribution of resources, it must adhere to these higher moral objectives. Natural law stipulates that material assets should address human necessities and the collective good, rather than just individual profit. Justice, one of the key virtues according to Aquinas, ensures that individuals honour the rights of others and the common good in their economic interactions. Therefore, the moral framework situates economic conduct within a purposeful understanding of human existence, aimed at ultimate goals that encompass, but go beyond, mere material prosperity.

Justice and Economic Relations

According to Aquinas, justice is a virtue focused on giving everyone what they are owed. In economic situations, justice regulates exchanges and allocations, promoting equity and honouring individuals as rational, free agents. Aquinas identifies various forms of justice: commutative justice (justice in interactions between individuals), distributive justice (justice regarding the distribution of goods within a society), and legal justice (justice in meeting responsibilities to political authority and the common good) (Weiss, 1995).

Commutative Justice

Commutative justice occurs in the agreements and transactions between individuals. Aquinas, following Aristotle, maintains that justice in exchanges necessitates proportional equality—each party must acquire what they are owed based on the agreement and the value of what is being traded. This principle is most notably articulated in Aquinas's concept of the just price, which asserts that prices in voluntary exchanges should reflect the genuine value of goods in relation to common perception.

The just price is more of a moral guideline than a strict mathematical formula, serving to protect against exploitation and dishonesty. It stems from the collective welfare and the recognition of human dignity. Aquinas emphasizes that both sellers and purchasers should not exploit ignorance or desperation by charging unfairly high prices, as this breaches justice and negatively impacts the community. Therefore, the just price represents a harmony between personal valuations and universal fairness (Hirschield, 2018).

Distributive Justice

Distributive justice concerns how goods and burdens are shared among members of the political community. According to Aquinas, the entity accountable for these distributions is the ruler or governing authority, which must exercise prudence and align its actions with the common good. Distributive justice guarantees that material resources are allocated to fulfil basic needs and promote the well-being of all members of society (Thomas & Williams, 2005).

Legal Justice

Legal justice is often referred to as a universal virtue because it relates to the overall organization of human behaviour within society. It functions through rational decision-making, connecting how all other virtues contribute to the collective well-being of the community. Aquinas specifically emphasises that legal justice governs the actions of other virtues in relation to the common good, much like charity guides them toward the ultimate divine goal. Thus, legal justice is fundamental to the communal and political expression of moral life. It transcends simple adherence to laws; instead, it focuses on fostering a consistent desire for the greater good of the community.

Through this virtue, individuals embrace the common good, making ethical involvement in political life a natural reflection of their moral character. Thomas Aquinas's notion of legal justice serves as a crucial component of his moral and legal philosophy. As a broad virtue, it connects individual moral behaviour with the collective aim of law, aligning both with the common good. This relationship between virtue, law, and community responsibility illustrates Aquinas's intricate perspective on how a just society should be organized — not solely through regulations, but through developed moral tendencies that guide human actions towards shared prosperity (Fortin, 1987).

Private Property, Just price and Usury in relation to Communal Good

Aquinas supports the concept of private property while highlighting its moral boundaries. Unlike radical communism, which eliminates personal ownership, Aquinas contends that private property encourages responsible management, accountability, and generosity. Nevertheless, ownership must ultimately contribute to the common good. The Church Fathers, especially Augustine, shaped Aquinas's perspective that resources should be utilized in accordance with the tenets of justice and charity.

The moral framework necessitates that economic participants acknowledge both their rights and responsibilities as property holders. Ownership grants the privilege to utilise, enjoy, and transfer

assets, but it also carries the obligation to aid those in need and foster the collective good. Aquinas's well-known statement emphasizes that man possesses the right to things, not because he owns them, but in relation to their use" (Aquinas, 1947, pp. 11-11,q.66,a.2). This indicates that property is intended for the purpose of human thriving and should be directed toward ethical objectives (Walsh R. , 2018).

The idea of the just price is one of Aquinas's key contributions to the field of economic ethics. Although Aquinas does not provide a specific method for calculating the just price, he maintains that it should align with the general valuation of the good and embody fairness in transactions. The notion of the just price is based on moral considerations rather than merely market dynamics. It calls for honest trading practices, consideration for human necessity, and a rejection of exploitation.

Aquinas's perspective can be viewed as a precursor to subsequent ethical discussions regarding market regulation and fair trade. The moral framework places limits on economic actions: when buyers and sellers prioritize only their own interests and disregard the common good, market dealings become unjust. Aquinas thus anticipates modern concerns about monopoly power, unfair pricing, and inequality (Lapidus, 1994; Koehn & Wilbratte, 2012).

Aquinas's examination of usury—imposing interest on loans—demonstrates his overarching focus on fairness in economic interactions. Aligning with Scripture and the teachings of the Church, Aquinas denounces usury as being against human solidarity and the moral framework. In Aquinas's view, money serves as a means of exchange rather than a productive asset; levying interest on money by itself takes advantage of the vulnerable and views human necessity as a tool for profit (Walsh A. , 2024).

Some contemporary economists may view Aquinas's position as no longer relevant, yet his profound moral perspective emphasizes the role of economic activity and the inherent value of individuals. Economic fairness does not allow for profit that comes at the expense of human exploitation. Aquinas's condemnation of usury

thus aligns with modern ethical worries regarding predatory lending and financialization.

Aquinas's views on economics are closely connected to his understanding of human nature and purpose. Humans are rational and social beings whose ultimate goal is happiness—unity with God. Economic activities serve as tools to obtain the material necessities for life and community, rather than being goals in themselves. The moral framework places economic existence within the larger picture of human flourishing (Lamont, 2002).

According to Aquinas, virtues are qualities that allow individuals to act in harmony with reason and adhere to moral principles. Economic behaviour necessitates virtues like justice, temperance, and prudence. Justice ensures equitable treatment; temperance curbs greed and the excessive longing for wealth; prudence aids in making practical choices for the collective good. Aquinas deems greed and avarice as negative traits that undermine economic fairness. Accumulating wealth solely for its own benefit contradicts natural law, which leads individuals towards fulfilling goods that satisfy genuine human needs. Economic actions driven by virtue reinforce the moral framework by aligning personal behaviour with human objectives.

The idea of the common good is fundamental to Aquinas's views on society and economic morality. The common good involves the conditions necessary for individuals and communities to thrive. Economic justice is closely linked with the advancement of the common good: fair wages, just prices, equitable resource distribution, and responsible management of property all foster social harmony. Aquinas contends that political authority plays a key role in protecting the common good through laws and institutions. Nevertheless, individual economic actors also have a duty to maintain justice. Charity, defined as love for one's neighbour, urges those with more resources to help those in need (Finnis, Aquinas on the Common Good, 2011; Sigmund, 1987).

Contemporary Relevance

Although Aquinas wrote his works in a pre-modern economic context, his ethical views remain pertinent in today's world. Current debates about income inequality, the moral limits of markets, corporate responsibility, and social welfare reflect the concerns that Aquinas anticipated. Today's interpretations of distributive justice often emphasize equality, necessity, and fairness. Aquinas's ethical framework recognizes individual rights while prioritizing the common good. His concept of the universal destination of goods is in line with contemporary social teachings regarding economic participation and access to vital resources. The doctrine of just price indicates that markets should function within ethical guidelines. Modern movements like fair trade and corporate social responsibility resonate with Aquinas's assertion that economic dealings must honour human dignity and community well-being.

The just price doctrine posits that economic transactions should be grounded in ethical principles. Current movements such as fair trade and corporate social responsibility echo Aquinas's insistence that economic exchanges must respect human dignity and promote community well-being. Aquinas's rejection of usury leads us to examine modern financial practices that could exploit vulnerable populations. While financial systems have evolved, the moral obligation to protect those at risk and prevent exploitation remains relevant. Aquinas's natural law theory has experienced both support and critique. Some modern scholars argue that later natural law thinkers, like John Finnis, diverge from Aquinas's foundational ideas on crucial points, including the understanding of the human good.

Contemporary scholarly debates also investigate whether Aquinas successfully links the essence of human nature (what it is) with ethical duties (what individuals ought to do), addressing the longstanding issue of the is/ought problem in moral philosophy. When evaluated through a modern perspective, Aquinas's perspectives on economics reveal certain shortcomings. For instance, his denunciation of interest sharply contrasts with today's financial landscape, where credit and interest are vital elements. Some critics argue that the

notion of a just price is too subjective for the intricacies of modern markets. Nonetheless, these critiques do not undermine Aquinas's essential moral insights; rather, they encourage scholars to reassess his ideas in the context of contemporary economic systems while maintaining the moral basis that underpins economic equity.

In a time characterized by moral ambiguity, political division, economic disparity, and discussions surrounding human rights, academics are increasingly looking to pre-modern texts for ethical guidance. Among these texts, Thomas Aquinas holds a unique position. His extensive exploration of natural law, virtue, justice, and the common good offers a coherent ethical framework that stands in stark contrast to the proceduralism and individualism found in contemporary liberal ideologies. The resurgence of Thomistic philosophy in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—especially through the contributions of John Finnis, Alasdair MacIntyre, and others—demonstrates Aquinas's ongoing significance.

Rather than viewing Aquinas solely as a historical theologian focused on medieval issues, modern thinkers reinterpret his concepts to address contemporary philosophical and political challenges. John Finnis's work, Natural Law and Natural Rights , marks a significant resurgence of Thomistic moral theory within analytic philosophy. Finnis redefines Aquinas's framework by pinpointing basic human goods such as life, knowledge, play, aesthetic experience, friendship, religion, and practical rationality. These goods establish a basis for moral reasoning that is objective and does not necessitate specific theological beliefs. Finnis illustrates that Aquinas's natural law can act as a rational foundation for discussions of human rights and principles of constitutional law. In a society facing moral relativism and legal positivism, Finnis's Thomistic approach provides an understanding of moral objectivity rooted in practical reasoning rather than personal preference (Finnis, 2011).

Expanding on Finnis, Robert P. George utilizes Thomistic natural law to address modern constitutional and bioethical issues. His writings demonstrate how Aquinas's theory can contribute to conversations about the ethical boundaries of law, human dignity, and the basis for rights. In diverse democracies where law frequently

exists independently of moral reasoning, Thomistic natural law offers a framework for reestablishing the link between legal practice and ethical values. Collectively, these scholars reveal that Aquinas continues to be a fundamental figure in discussions surrounding moral realism, legal interpretation, and the philosophical justification of rights (George, 2000).

Aquinas's ethical framework is primarily centred around virtue. He combines Aristotelian virtue ethics with Christian theology, suggesting that moral existence is directed towards human flourishing (eudaimonia) and ultimately, beatitude. In his work After Virtue (1981), Alasdair Macintyre critiques the fragmentation and emotivism present in modern moral philosophy. He contends that contemporary ethical discussions lack unity due to the abandonment of the teleological perspective that is crucial to both Aristotle and Aquinas. While Macintyre does not exclusively adhere to Thomistic thought, he regards Aquinas as the most advanced proponent of Aristotelian ethics. Aquinas's blend of virtue, reason, and the common good provides a counterpoint to the moral individualism prevalent in liberal modernity. Macintyre's insights have had a profound impact on today's virtue ethics, business ethics, and political theory. Through the revival of Aquinas's teleological perspective on human flourishing, he shows that ethical reasoning necessitates a deep comprehension of human nature and purpose (Macintyre, 2010).

The revival of Thomistic thought has influenced ethics in both professional and business contexts. Academics like Mary Hirschfeld utilize Aquinas's virtue ethics to analyse market economies, proposing that economic endeavours should be directed towards serving the common good instead of solely focusing on maximizing profits. Within a global capitalist framework frequently condemned for its exploitation and inequity, Aquinas's principles of justice, temperance, and prudence provide essential normative direction (Hirschield, 2018).

Aquinas views political authority as directed towards the common good. Laws should foster virtue and enhance social cohesion. Jacques Maritain adapted Thomistic political ideas for contemporary

democratic environments. He contributed to the formation of postwar human rights dialogue and suggested that various philosophical traditions could agree on fundamental practical principles based on human dignity—a concept that aligns with Aquinas's perspective on natural law. Maritain's contributions demonstrate how Thomism can endorse democratic frameworks while upholding a meaningful moral outlook (Maritain, 1998).

Contemporary Thomists contest the liberal belief that the government should be impartial regarding various notions of the good. Aquinas's framework indicates that political communities inherently represent moral values. The renewed focus on the common good in political discourse reveals a discontent with strictly procedural views of justice, such as those articulated in Rawlsian liberalism. In discussions surrounding civic virtue, social unity, and moral education, Aquinas offers a perspective for comprehending political existence as fundamentally ethical rather than simply contractual.

Outside of ethics and politics, Aquinas has made an impact on modern metaphysics and the philosophy of religion. John Haldane introduced the term "Analytic Thomism" to refer to efforts that merge Aquinas's ideas with analytic philosophy. This movement tackles issues related to metaphysics, philosophy of mind, and moral psychology by utilizing Thomistic insights while adhering to current logical standards (Haldane, 1999). Eleonore Stump's studies on Aquinas have sparked renewed interest in his views on goodness, freedom, and suffering. By engaging Aquinas in conversation with contemporary philosophy of religion, Stump illustrates that medieval scholastic thought continues to be philosophically nuanced and pertinent to present-day discussions regarding God, evil, and moral accountability (Stump, 2008).

Aquinas's approach to just price, usury, and property pre-empts present-day issues related to market ethics. His belief that property rights should be seen as secondary to the universal purpose of goods offers a moral critique of unchecked capitalism. Modern Thomistic economists assert that markets should be judged not just on efficiency but also on their role in enhancing human well-being. This viewpoint shapes conversations about inequality, corporate

accountability, and fair distribution of resources. In a time marked by globalization and economic crises, Aquinas's blending of economics with moral philosophy serves as a remedy to purely technical and value-agnostic economic frameworks.

Aquinas's focus on virtue and justice has important implications for modern business ethics. Scholars contend that Aquinas's moral framework serves as a basis for recognizing corporate social responsibility (CSR) and ethical business behaviour as grounded in the common good and natural law instead of simply adhering to regulations. By positioning justice as a universal virtue in business, Aquinas's model encourages companies to harmonize their economic practices with larger social values and respect for human dignity. This perspective challenges models that prioritize profit maximization by asserting that economic activities carry moral significance and social repercussions.

In a time characterized by increasing inequality, discussions surrounding distributive justice, poverty reduction, and labour rights echo Aquinas's belief that economic systems should promote human well-being. Although contemporary justice theories, such as those based on Rawls's ideas, vary in their approaches, Aquinas's focus on fair access to resources and appropriate conditions for human development aligns with demands for living wages, just labour practices, and socially responsible policies. His ethic of relationships reinforces the notion that justice involves not only results but also the frameworks that regulate economic activity.

Aquinas's concept of natural law provides a philosophical foundation for universal principles in a diverse world. Global challenges—like human rights, environmental sustainability, and global economic regulation—require ethical bases that go beyond cultural and legal differences. Aquinas's reliance on reason and human nature establishes a structure for cross-cultural discussions concerning justice and economic organization. This significance goes beyond Catholic social doctrine to influence secular philosophy and discussions in international law (Keenan, 2024).

Modern critics of unrestricted markets draw inspiration from Aquinas's ethical critique of self-serving economic actions. His caution against deceit, exploitation, and usury brings to light ongoing ethical concerns in today's finance and international trade. Aquinas maintains that economic activities ought to promote trust and respect instead of unbridled competition lacking moral guidelines—a viewpoint that shapes current debates on financial oversight, consumer protections, and fair-trade practices.

Conclusion

Despite writing in a pre-modern era, Thomas Aquinas's ideas about economic justice and moral order continue to resonate today. By anchoring justice in virtue, natural law, and the common good, Aquinas presents a strong ethical framework that is still pertinent to modern issues surrounding economic inequality, business ethics, and social governance. His philosophy opposes purely positivist or utilitarian views in economics by emphasizing that moral factors must support economic structures and legal principles. In discussions about corporate social responsibility, distributive justice, or global governance, Aquinas's thoughts remain a valuable source for shaping equitable and compassionate economic systems in the twenty-first century. St. Thomas Aquinas offers a thorough moral framework that views economic justice as vital to the moral order.

By basing economic interactions on natural law and virtues, Aquinas underscores that economic activities ought to enhance human well-being and serve the common good. His thoughts on justice, private property, fair pricing, and the ethical limits of profit provide enduring wisdom for moral considerations in economics. Aquinas's viewpoint on the economy encourages us to think not just about what markets can achieve, but also about what they ought to accomplish within a moral context that respects human dignity. In an era characterized by economic inequality and ethical ambiguity, Aquinas's blend of theological and moral principles remains a significant contribution to discussions about justice and the good life.

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Social Glance: An Overview for the Readers

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Spacing	Double- spaced	----------
Margins	1 inch on all side	----------
Alignment	Left-aligned (except title, which is centred)	----------
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