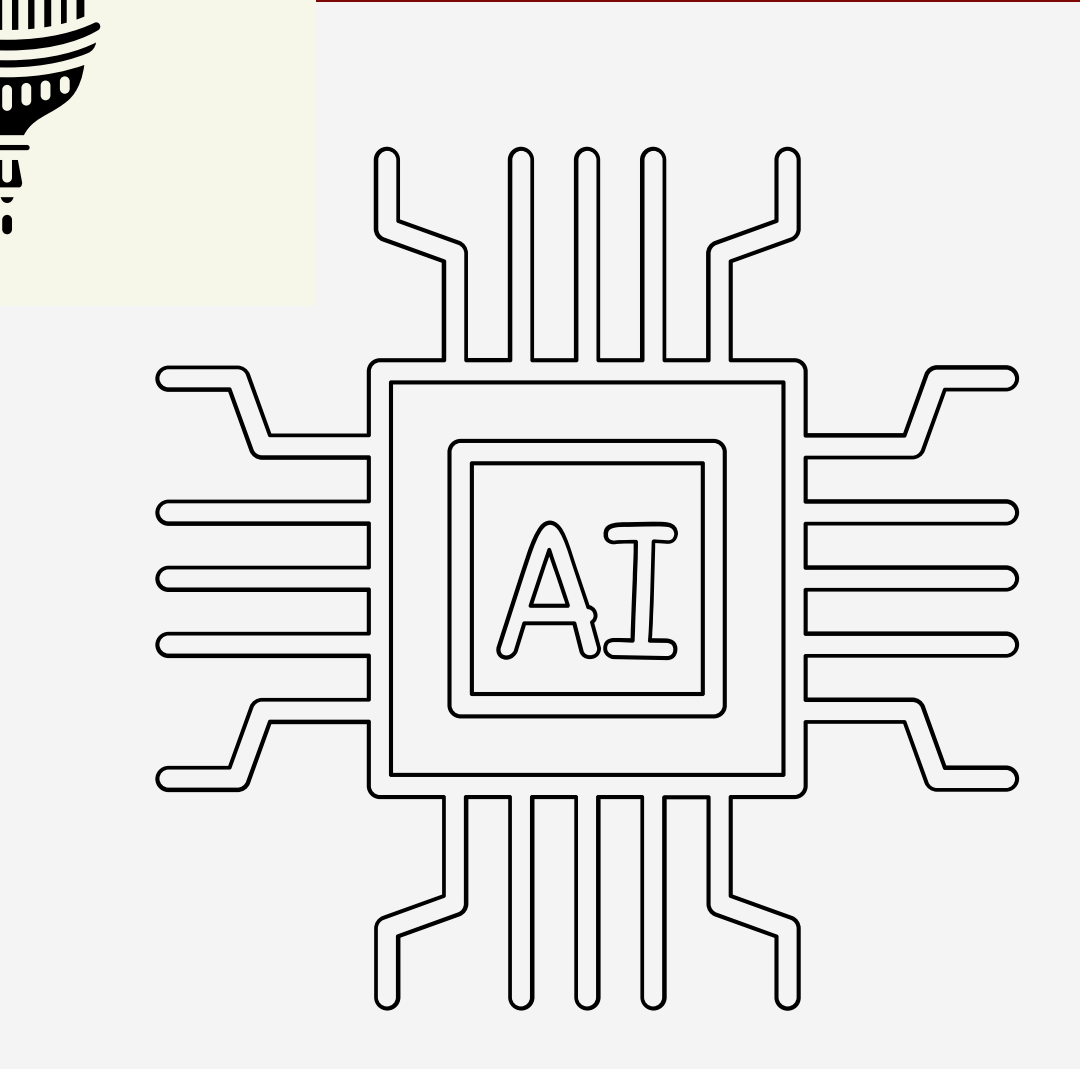
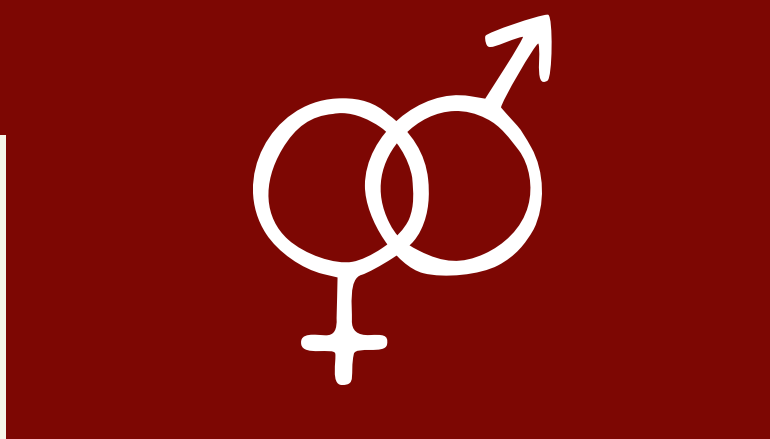




NICKELED & DIMED



CENTRE FOR NEW ECONOMICS STUDIES



EDITOR'S NOTE

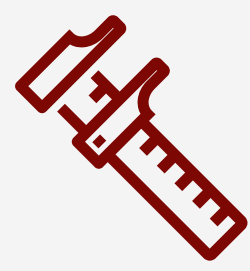
Nickeled and Dimed, the official research platform of the Centre for New Economics Studies (CNES) at Jindal School of International Affairs, O.P. Jindal Global University, serves as an open academic forum. It offers well-researched, balanced commentaries on critical political, economic, social, and legal issues across seven research clusters: Public Policy, International Relations, Legal Studies, Environment & Social Issues, Gender & Society, History & Culture, and Finance & Economics.

In an era of abundant information but scarce clarity, Nickeled and Dimed bridges academic inquiry with public discourse. This edition comprises of insightful articles that address contemporary issues and examines their broader implications through books, critical commentaries, and audio-visual narratives.

- **Public Policy- "From Colonial Examinations to NEET: Is India Still Governed Through Tests?"**
- **Legal Studies- "AI Paralegal and the Indian Legal System: Navigating Efficiency, Bias, and Constitutional Accountability"**
- **Environment and Social Issues- "Nature is Not a Rulebook"**
- **History and Culture- "Animation Throughout the Ages: Cartoon as a Wartime Contrivance"**
- **International Relations - "The Treaty We Don't Have: AI Weapons and the Failure of Arms Control"**
- **Gender & Society- "The currency of wombs: The Practice of Mass Hysterectomies and its impacts"**
- **Economics and Finance- "Beyond the Ribbon-Cutting: The True Cost of India's Vizhinjam Port"**



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THE TREATY WE DON'T HAVE: AI WEAPONS AND THE FAILURE OF ARMS CONTROL

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS CLUSTER I
MADHAV PRANSUKHKA



ABSTRACT

Most arms control agreements of the last hundred years share a hidden assumption. They assume a dangerous weapon is something you can find. Nuclear warheads can be counted. A uranium enrichment plant can be inspected. A chemical agent can be sampled and confirmed. Treaties like the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Chemical Weapons Convention are built around this. The weapon is a physical object: you can locate it, and you can verify whether a state is keeping its word.

Artificial intelligence does not behave like that, and the world has not yet worked out a good answer to the problem.



INTRODUCTION: A WEAPON MADE OF CODE

Think about what AI actually is when a military uses it. It is not a missile or a tank. It is code. A machine learning model that recommends songs on a music app could, if you trained it on different data, help an army work out which building to hit. There is no warehouse you can walk through and no stockpile to weigh. A model can be copied a thousand times in an afternoon and emailed across a border in seconds. Inspecting it is not just difficult, it is close to meaningless.

People call AI a dual-use technology, but the phrase makes it sound tamer than it is. Enriched uranium has almost no everyday purpose, which is exactly why governments can keep track of it. The maths behind a targeting algorithm is the same maths taught in undergraduate computer science and used every day by companies that have nothing to do with the military. You cannot outlaw knowledge without shutting down a large part of ordinary economic life. Some of the scientists and company founders who built these systems have started publicly warning about where they might go, which tells you something about how uneasy even the insiders have become.

There is also the question of pace. A treaty can take years to negotiate, sometimes longer. The technology changes within months. A definition states that this year can be out of date before anyone signs it. Arms control has always been slow, but it used to regulate things that were slow as well. That is no longer true.

It would be easy to file all this under science fiction, the stuff of distant scenarios and walking robots. The reality is more ordinary, and it has already happened.

That difference changes the entire logic of arms control. Traditional treaties regulate objects; AI would require regulating capabilities, software, and human decision-making instead.

GAZA WAS THE FIRST DRAFT

The clearest example is the war in Gaza. The Israeli outlets +972 Magazine and Local Call reported on AI systems the Israeli military used to help pick targets, and their reporting was later examined by The Guardian and assessed by Human Rights Watch. One system, nicknamed the Gospel, generated lists of buildings recommended for attack. Another, called Lavender, reportedly gave people in Gaza a score based on their suspected links to armed groups and assembled a database of possible targets.

This is the part worth slowing down on, because it is where a lot of writing on the subject goes off the rails. These were not machines deciding on their own to kill anyone. They suggested targets to human officers, and the officers decided whether to strike. The Israeli military said its analysts reviewed each target against the rules of international law. What people argue about is how serious that review really was.

According to the reporting, some officers spent only a brief moment confirming a target before signing off, and the system was understood by its own users to be wrong in roughly one case in ten. The Israeli military rejected the way its systems were portrayed but did not deny they were being used.

You do not have to settle the argument over any single airstrike to take the broader point.

AI was used to speed up targeting in a real war, the legal questions were serious, and there was no specific treaty anywhere governing it. Yuval Abraham, the journalist behind the original investigation, made a point that is hard to shake. The technology did not invent the decision to bomb people in their homes, he argued, but it let that decision be carried out at a scale that would not have been possible before. That is the thing arms control is supposed to slow down, and the thing it cannot touch right now.

GENEVA IS TALKING, NOT ARRIVING

Governments have not ignored the issue entirely. Since 2014 states have been discussing lethal autonomous weapons in a forum in Geneva called the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons. The UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, along with the President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, has urged states to agree to a legally binding treaty by the end of 2026, calling weapons that operate without human control politically unacceptable and morally repugnant. By 2025, more than 120 countries supported the idea of negotiating such a treaty, and that year France, Germany and more than forty other states declared that the draft material was ready for actual negotiation.

So there is some movement. The trouble is that talking about a treaty and having one are different things, and the obstacles in the way are not new.

The Geneva process runs by consensus, which in plain terms means any one country can stop it.

The states with the most advanced military AI have the least reason to tie their own hands. People who follow the talks closely point out that even if the discussions move forward, a state like Russia or the United States could simply block the step to real negotiations, or insist on something far weaker than a binding deal. The current round of talks runs only to the end of 2026, and formal negotiations probably would not start before 2027, if they start at all.

Anyone who has studied international law will recognise the shape of this. The institutions are there. They put out statements, host conferences and produce thoughtful documents. Whether any of it is enforced comes down to whether powerful states are willing to be bound, and when their own strategic interests are on the line, that willingness has a habit of disappearing. AI weapons are just the latest place the old pattern shows up.

WHY THIS ONE IS WORSE

What makes this case harder than the ones before it is the nature of the technology. Nuclear arms control had something going for it that is missing here. Only a handful of states could build a bomb, and the materials were rare and traceable. Military AI has neither advantage. A great many countries can develop it, the building blocks are everywhere, and a capable system could end up with groups no treaty would ever reach. Experts have warned that fairly cheap autonomous systems might fall into the hands of militias or criminal networks, which makes the old approach of policing a short list of governments look almost out of date.

CONCLUSION

That does not make the effort worthless. A treaty with clear limits, even a flawed one, would still beat the silence we have now. Rules shape what people do even when they get broken, and a shared standard at least gives critics something solid to point at. But it would be dishonest to pretend the outlook is good. The technology keeps racing ahead, the politics stay stuck, and the gap between the two is being filled, for now, by what happens on real battlefields.

We are trying to govern the weapons of this century with the habits of the last one. Until that changes, the rules that matter most will keep being written the worst way possible, one war at a time.

ANIMATION THROUGHOUT THE AGES: CARTOON AS A WARTIME CONTRIVANCE

HISTORY CLUSTER I PRISHAA



ABSTRACT

Animation has been one of history's most effective propaganda tools. This article examines the systematic weaponisation of animated media by ruling governments across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, using Gramsci's concept of hegemony and Nye's theory of soft power. From Disney's wartime output and the Censored Eleven to Soyuzmultfilm's Socialist Realism and India's postcolonial nation-building, each case illustrates how animation launders ideology as entertainment. The article argues that animation has consistently functioned as a medium through which states naturalise ideology by disguising political persuasion as entertainment.

INTRODUCTION:

The durability of power has never persisted through mere brutality or coercion; its most effective form lives in sculpting the monotony of our everyday lives. This phenomenon is what Antonio Gramsci conceptualised as hegemony while imprisoned by the fascist regime during the 1930s. For Gramsci, hegemonic power operates deceptively, blurring the lines between the alternative use of force and consent. The consent of an individual is procured through the edges of civil society that institutionalises individuals and slowly connects them to a more abstract political sphere, launching subliminal messages through this ground. The submission of people to a hegemonic order, however, goes beyond just submitting to it, they also absorb and internalise it within themselves. Eventually whatever is portrayed as natural, normal, or optimal comes to be regarded as objective truth or common sense.

The concept of soft power in Joseph Nye's language indicates a parallel process, approaching from another perspective. States do not necessarily need to use force, especially in cases where they manage to introduce certain ideas to the masses and slowly condition them to believing the same. In both cases, what is important is the same principle: culture performs tasks that force is unable to perform. Culture actively shapes the forms of desire, memory, and common sense. The political history of animation becomes clear once it is realised that culture is manufactured out of power and not always a reflection of society.

AMERICA:THE STUDIO AS ARSENAL

The United States is one of the most prominent examples since it shows how easily entertainment and state interests can collapse into each other. When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbour in December 1941, the United States Army moved into the Walt Disney Studios. Within days, it became in effect part of the wartime machinery of the American state. Government contracts began pouring in, studio facilities were used for military purposes, and Disney's output turned sharply to war propaganda. It was a transformation so complete that it nearly bankrupted the company. Disney's wartime output — including *Der Führer's Face* (1942), *Education for Death* (1943), and *Victory Through Air Power* (1943)—employed Donald Duck, Mickey Mouse and a cast of anthropomorphised villains to manufacture consent for a war that its audience had wanted to avoid only months before. *Der Führer's Face* won the Academy Award for Best Animated Short and is a masterpiece of ideological craft precisely because it works as entertainment first. The duck dreams it. The audience laughs. The portrayal of fascism as pure nightmare arrives as catharsis rather than argument. The studio's production grew tenfold during the war years, underwritten by military contracts. The profit motive and the propaganda motive were structurally identical. The writers of the film explicitly pointed out that using a beloved character like Donald Duck would bring the situation home to ordinary citizens in a way no actor could. The first principle of animation-as-propaganda is that it works best

THE RACIAL INTERIOR: AMERICA'S OTHER CARTOON WAR

American animation was not limited to the production of anti-fascist propaganda, but it also served an entirely different propaganda project, which was the normalisation of domestic racial hierarchy.

The Censored Eleven were eleven Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies shorts produced from 1931 to 1944 and removed from syndication in 1968. Created by some of the industry's most celebrated animators—including Friz Freleng, Tex Avery, Bob Clampett, and Chuck Jones—the shorts embedded white supremacist imagery into popular entertainment.

The cartoons leaned heavily on minstrel traditions through blackface caricatures, the happy slave, the superstitious churchgoer and other recurring stereotypes.

This contradiction is particularly well illustrated by Coal Black and de Sebben Dwarfs (1943), made in the same year as Disney's anti-Nazi propaganda. One part of the industry mobilised animation against fascism abroad, while another normalised anti-Black racism at home.

Through the constant repetition of caricatures like the savage African, the natural-born musician, and the watermelon-eater, these films turned racial prejudice into ordinary entertainment. Unlike wartime propaganda, this genre of work was not directed against an external enemy, but towards the legitimisation of an internal social order. It worked by making racial

THE SOVIET UNION: ARCHITECTURE OF AMBIENT CONSENT

Soyuzmultfilm, founded in 1936, offers the cleanest case study in state-directed cultural production precisely because it was so explicitly theorised from within the state apparatus itself.

It operated according to the principles of Socialist Realism; animation had to be clear, hopeful, and ideological in nature, stripped of any abstraction which might distract the citizenry from its collective responsibilities.

A content analysis of Soyuzmultfilm films in the Stalinist period and after reveals three recurring motifs: anti-capitalism, anti-fascism, and socialism celebration, where capitalistic characters are depicted in exaggerated, grotesque form whose language of images echoes the language of dehumanisation of the racial caricature of American minstrelsy, though class and not race becomes the focus here.

The method is the same in both cases the ideologically threatening character is stripped down to visual repulsiveness which turns him subhuman.

However, what makes the Soviet case study so analytically interesting is the post-war development of the genre. The films *Cheburashka*, *Nu Pogodi*, and even the Soviet *Winnie-the-Pooh* were products of the same state mechanism behind wartime anti-fascist agitation. The propaganda function of these films was no longer just felt on the screen, as it now became part of the larger culture.

INDIA: THE POSTCOLONIAL CARTOON

India's case is the most instructive for understanding animation-as-propaganda outside the wartime paradigm because it demonstrates that the phenomenon is not about war but about power in its broadest sense. Specifically, the challenge of constructing a unified national consciousness across a society fractured by language, religion, caste, and region after the trauma of colonial partition. Ek Anek Aur Ekta (One, Many and Unity, 1974), produced by the Films Division of India under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting and broadcast on the state television network Doordarshan, is a seven-minute animated tale of birds flying separately which are tragically caught by the hunter. With collective effort the birds fly together and escape, the message unity in diversity became a central theme of promotion. The official ideological formulation of the postcolonial Indian state was delivered through a song sufficiently catchy that an entire generation of Indian children could recite it decades later. Critics have since noted that the film's vision of national unity glossed over the real fractures of the Indian polity, imposing a homogenising narrative on a diversity that was not merely cultural but politically contentious. Ram Mohan, known as the father of modern Indian animation, produced animated films for Films Division on family planning (*Baap Re Baap*, 1968), and on democracy itself (*You Said It*, 1971); both are state-sponsored media that promoted government policies among the citizenry, their essence conveyed ideology in a way that a government directive could not. The post-colonial government realised what

CONCLUSION

Across the cases examined various timelines across nations, it is safe to say, animation has repeatedly been discovered by nations and ideological institutions as one of the most efficient mediums through which power can naturalise itself. Animation disarms because it comes to us in the guise of childhood, nonsense, and play. It merely needs to charm and familiarise until ideology hardens into memory. The question is not whether we are consuming propaganda but rather if we are able to engage in media while being aware of what it is really propagating.

NATURE IS NOT A RULEBOOK

ENVIRONMENT & SOCIAL ISSUES
CLUSTER | ISHITA SHARMA



ABSTRACT

Arguments about how people may live often end with an appeal to nature, on the assumption that nature keeps a fixed order of true selves against which some lives count as counterfeit. This essay tests that assumption against three biological deceptions: the bee orchid, the mimicking hoverfly, and the predatory Photuris firefly. None of these conceals a true self beneath a false one; there is only performance, judged by whether it works on an audience. Read against India's Section 377, the cases suggest that "it's natural too" is the wrong reply, because nature was never the judge to begin with.

INTRODUCTION: AN APPEAL TO NATURE

On a warm afternoon in southern Europe, a male bee lands on a flower and tries to mate with it. To him, it looks like a female bee, feels like one, and smells like one: the plant copies the scent a female gives off when she is ready to mate. He keeps trying, gets nowhere, and flies off, carrying pollen he will rub onto the next flower that deceives him the same way. This is the bee orchid, it produces no nectar and offers its pollinator no reward. It survives by sexual deception; it does not attract bees so much as dupe them.

We reach for nature constantly when we argue about people. A way of living is defended or attacked on the grounds that it is "natural" or "unnatural." Who may love whom, what men and women are supposedly built for, what a "real" family looks like: sooner or later, someone points to nature as the final authority. The assumption is that beneath all our culture and our choices lies a natural order telling us what we really are and how we are meant to behave. So we should look at nature to see whether it actually contains a rulebook of that kind. The bee orchid is a useful place to begin, because it is doing the one thing nature is supposed never to do: lying. a matter of inner truth; it was a skill, judged entirely by how well it worked on those watching. By that measure, the orchid excels: it performs female-bee realness, and the male bee is the only judge it must convince.

Except that it is not really lying, for lying requires a truth to conceal, and the orchid has none. There is no secret bee-self tucked inside the flower that the disguise covers up. It is simply a flower that broadcasts a bee's mating signal convincingly, because over millions of years, the flowers that did so left more offspring than those that did not.

Nothing is being hidden, the performance is the whole organism. If you went looking for the "real" orchid beneath the disguise, hoping to catch it being its true self, you would find nothing there but more orchids.

There is a human word that fits this better than "lying," and it comes from drag. In the ballrooms of Black and Latino queer New York, the world documented in *Paris Is Burning*, performers competed at "realness": not at being a thing, but at passing convincingly as it. One could win at "executive realness" or "schoolgirl realness" by performing the look and the manner so well as to pass unremarked in a world that was often hostile. Realness was never a matter of inner truth; it was a skill, judged entirely by how well it worked on those watching. By that measure, the orchid excels: it performs female-bee realness, and the male bee is the only judge it must convince.

A DISGUISE

Look closer, and nature turns out to be crowded with performances of this kind. Consider the hoverfly, a harmless and stingless fly marked in the warning yellow and black of a wasp, so that birds, wary of being stung, leave it alone. The puzzling part is that many hoverflies are poor copies. Set one beside a real wasp and it is clearly inaccurate in shape and detail. For a long time, this troubled biologists: why has selection not refined the disguise? The answer is that the fly is not trying to resemble a wasp to us, nor even to match any particular wasp. It need only trip a rough alarm in a bird's brain: yellow and black, possibly dangerous, not worth the risk. It is not copying a real wasp; it is copying whatever shape that alarm takes inside the bird. The disguise is aimed at an easily fooled audience so the disguise can be imperfect and still succeed.

Some of these performances are lethal. In the warm dark of an American summer, fireflies flash to find mates, each species with its own coded rhythm of light. The males of one genus, *Photinus*, flash their pattern and wait for a female to answer. A female of another genus, *Photuris*, has learned to counterfeit that answer.

She flashes back exactly what a *Photinus* female would, the hopeful male descends to her, and she seizes and eats him. She is neither expressing some inner firefly truth nor betraying one. The flash is merely a tool, and a borrowed one. The most important signal in her life is a forgery, and there is no "real" self beneath it for the forgery to betray.

NO ORIGINAL BENEATH THE COPY

The three cases share a feature. In none is there a true version concealed beneath a false one: the orchid is not a "real" something pretending to be a bee, the hoverfly is not a wasp at heart, and the firefly does not betray her own nature, since her nature is simply to flash whatever yields a meal. And in each the disguise exists only in relation to an observer, nothing without a bee to fall for it, a bird to be deterred, a rival firefly to read the flash as a promise. The disguise is not a private fact about the creature; it is a relation between the creature and its audience. There is no fixed inner "what it really is" to uncover, only what works, upon whom, and when.

One might object that this is merely a trick of language. An orchid has no true self hidden inside it, but it has no self at all, no more than a stone does, and this tells us nothing about human beings, who do have inner lives.

The objection is fair, and it is precisely the point. I am not claiming that the orchid reveals anything about what lies within a person. I am making a claim about nature itself. When someone says the natural order settles how we should live, they are imagining nature as a book of fixed, true essences. No such book exists. The living world does not keep true selves filed beneath false fronts. It runs on disguise, mimicry, and borrowed or altered signals, performances judged only by whether they work.

SECTION 377 AND THE ORDER OF NATURE

This is not an abstract worry. For more than a century and a half, Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code punished what it called carnal intercourse "against the order of nature," and was used to harass and criminalise people of the LGBTQIA+ community. The law made nature the test, and treated certain lives as offences against it.

That is the tempting reply, and it is true as far as it goes: same-sex pairing and sex change occur across the living world once one looks for them. Yet the reply contains a trap: to answer "it's unnatural" with "no, it's natural" is still to let nature deliver the verdict; it merely asks for a gentler one. Even the biologists who catalogue these behaviours caution against the move: that an animal does something should not be what makes a human life acceptable.

The orchid points to a better answer. I am not saying that biology is meaningless, or that people have no depths.

I am saying that the thing the argument reaches for: nature as a fixed order of true selves and counterfeits, the real and the fake — is not there to be reached for. The living world keeps no "order of nature" in the sense the phrase requires. It holds only performances that work, flowers that succeed by breaking that very order, none concealing a true self beneath a false one. Nature was never the judge of how we ought to live.

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CONCLUSION

If nature is not the judge, something else must be. The questions worth asking are not whether some plant or animal also does it, but human ones like whether it is freely chosen, whether it harms anyone, whether it can be reconciled with treating people as equals who are owed dignity. These are the judgments we must make ourselves, and the firmer ground on which Section 377 fell.

What endures from that 2018 judgment is the recognition that a person's intimate life, where it harms no one, is their own, not that homosexuality is natural because animals practise it. It is a matter of dignity, privacy, and equality, settled on human terms rather than referred to nature. The orchid cannot tell us how to live; nothing in nature can. It can only rid us of a bad question and leave us the better ones to answer for ourselves.

THE CURRENCY OF WOMBS: THE PRACTICE OF MASS HYSTERECTOMIES AND ITS IMPACTS

GENDER AND SOCIETY CLUSTER | SRITHA M



ABSTRACT

This article aims to discuss how the mass hysterectomies of Dalit and Adivasi women working in Maharashtra's sugarcane fields are not merely isolated events, but are parts of a much bigger system built on caste-gendered structural violence. In it, the state's lack of labour protections, the profit motives of private healthcare, and the caste-based disposability of bodies all come together to surgically remove women's reproductive organs so that their labour can be utilized without interruptions. Further, this article also shows that this pattern is spread across India beyond the sugarcane industry, and argues that no single person or body is to be blamed for this phenomenon. It discusses several financial, social, and physical conditions that guide these women to resort to this procedure.

INTRODUCTION

“There is no human rights violation worse than having to remove your uterus so you can enter an informal economy that does not care for you”
- Nirja Bhatnagar, ActionAid, Mumbai.

Archana Ashok Chaure was married off to a sugarcane labourer at 14, following which she began working rigorous hours of labor every day, often interrupted by her womanhood. At an age where she did not even know what marriage was, she was part of a much bigger system – one that marries off young girls into illegal child marriages where they work by cutting and gathering sugarcane. Another victim of this system was Ashabai Prabhaskar, married at 13 and a mother of four by 21. She, like the other women, faced interruptions from her rigorous 16-hour work shifts due to recurrent UTIs from the lack of hygienic menstrual products and clean water. For these women, missing a day of work meant heavy fines to be paid to the mukadams or sugarcane contractors. These situations are what pushed these women to opt for an expensive but permanent solution: a hysterectomy.

According to surveys conducted by the local NGOs in 2019, it was found that the rate of hysterectomies amongst women from Beed, one of Maharashtra’s biggest hubs for sugar cane workers, was 36% compared to a national average of 3%.

THE SYSTEM

The Mukadam system is a traditional labour contracting system that is largely used in South Asian agricultural and construction sectors. The system works like this: a Mukadam acts as a middleman or labour contractor hired by sugar factories to recruit cheap labour. Workers are often hired in pairs (called koytas), usually a husband and wife, generally through informal, unwritten contracts.

The Mukadam advances loans and manages the labourers’ wages in exchange for a fee.

These men earn a commission of around 15-20% and take at least 30% of the workers’ wages. The workers are often hired with false promises of financial advances that cover travel and living expenses, and while this may initially work, it soon becomes a cycle where they are stuck in debt. The debt becomes almost impossible to repay in time because of their low wages, and workers who cannot pay it off within the first season return to work under the same harsh conditions for the following seasons. The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976, clearly bans this practice altogether. But in the Mukadam system, workers are still held accountable for these debts, even though legally the debts are to be considered null and void. This system is not only horrific, but it is also unconstitutional and illegal.

The workers do not get breaks, and fines are imposed for every time they miss the set daily requirement for harvested sugarcane. For female workers, period pain or pregnancy would mean more missed days of work, therefore more lost wages and added fines. Besides, these women resort to using rags during menstruation, which are often reused with no clean water to wash them and nowhere to dispose of them. Tampons or pads remain almost completely inaccessible due to how expensive they are. This leads to numerous infections and complications like Pelvic Inflammatory Disease (PID), Vaginitis, Leucorrhoea, etc., all inevitably linked to poor menstrual hygiene, lack of clean water, and lack of sexual and reproductive health awareness.

THE CASTE DIMENSION

Nearly 80% of the sugarcane harvesting and transport workers are seasonal migrants who come mainly from the drought-prone areas of the Marathwada region. A number of these workers are from the tribal areas of Dhule and Nandurbar. Importantly, the majority of these workers come from scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, and minority sections.

The caste system has historically subjected the SC and ST communities to the most physically brutal forms of labour. It decides the healthcare conditions for these communities; though government healthcare may be accessible, Dalit and Adivasi women still share experiences of discrimination and denial of basic care. It is a system that determines which bodies are available for discipline and socially marked as disposable.

In her work “Who is a woman and who is a dalit?”, Sowjanya T explains that modern society often leaves out Dalit women from the equation of social justice. The notion that ‘all women are white and all men are black’ becomes ‘all women are upper-caste, and all men are Dalit’. The lack of intersectionality while understanding social justice issues pushes women into the lower end of the hierarchy, and Dalit women even lower. The caste system creates a system of ‘graded patriarchy’, and for Dalit women, this ties along with the ‘graded inequalities’ of caste.

Historically, upper-caste men have had access to Dalit women’s sexuality and body, and this does not only reflect in sexual violence, but also in labour. Every year, many female labourers in the sugarcane industry are sexually assaulted by supervisors and landowners. Female workers in western Maharashtra’s fields are subjected to routine abuse and rape by the landlords and middlemen.

This becomes another common reason among the women in this industry for hysterectomies – to avoid pregnancies from repeated abuse. Agricultural women workers were 32% more likely to undergo a hysterectomy compared to other occupation groups, said a study published in the 'Journal of Medical Evidence'.

BEYOND SUGARCANE: A PATTERN ACROSS INDIA:

The “solution” of removing the uterus to make Dalit and Adivasi women’s labour “more efficient” is not solely a story of the sugarcane industry of Maharashtra. Manual scavenging, a practice that is heavily sanctioned by caste, shows an estimated 1.3 million Dalit workers pushed into its labour force, and around 75% of these are women employed. “There is an increasing incidence of hysterectomies among the women manual scavengers of Jalaun, which leaves their families destitute and trapped in debt bondage,” claims local activist Kuldeep Kumar Baudh.

Manual scavenging puts female workers through several health and occupational hazards. The direct handling of human excreta, the indirect ingestion of toxic chemicals, and the physical strain of carrying heavy waste loads on their heads or hips often lead to severe gynecological complications, including pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), hormonal imbalances, and even increased rates of miscarriages.

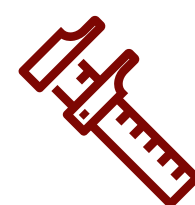
Further, the women who work in the practice of manual scavenging are from different Dalit caste communities like Valmiki in Punjab and Delhi; Haila and Halalkhor in Madhya Pradesh and UP, and Mister and Dome in Bihar. These women are subjected to sexual and physical violence regularly from their employers, contractors, and community members, whether that is as punishment for missing days of work or otherwise.

In almost every industry, the same caste groups ultimately bear the cost – Dalit and Adivasi communities. It is a pattern that finds itself repeating wherever Dalit and Adivasi women make up the majority of the workforce. Specific industries like sugarcane, tea, and manual scavenging all may reform and transform themselves with time, but the structure of it will remain the same: caste determines who does the work, gender determines whose bodies are surgically altered, and the state stays silent.

CONCLUSION

Mass hysterectomies, therefore, are not to be chalked off as isolated events but as a part of a much bigger system built on caste-gendered structural violence that stubbornly replicates itself across industries like sugarcane, manual scavenging, tea, etc. This is because it operates anywhere Dalit and Adivasi women perform the least protected and the most physically demanding work. In these conditions, no woman is explicitly forced to get a hysterectomy. No contractors, no doctors, and no families force these female workers. . But, when a woman works around sixteen hours daily, where missing even a single day costs her a fine and abuse, the system has already chosen for her. The coercion is built through the conditions set for her. This makes us question who is to be held accountable. Is it the Mukadam who sets the conditions? Is it the doctors who perform the surgeries? Is it the sugar mill contractors who refuse to take responsibility? Or is it the state that fails its promise of protecting the labour force? The answer is all of them, and none alone. The violence is systemic, and until and unless the system is held accountable as one, the hysterectomies will continue.

BEYOND THE RIBBON-CUTTING: THE TRUE COST OF INDIA'S VIZHINJAM PORT



ECOFIN - ADITYAA KONDURY

Abstract

Historically, India's maritime trade relied on global transshipment hubs like Colombo, Singapore, and Jebel Ali. Despite the world's fifth-largest economy and a vast coastline it historically watched nearly 75% of its container transshipment cargo pass through feeder ships to foreign hubs. This dependency on foreign ports added upwards of \$100 per container in extra logistics costs but also delayed turnaround time and exposed India's trade to supply chain disruption. While also leading to inefficiencies which resulted in an annual economic loss of USD 200–220 million for the Indian side. In a bid to restrict this capital flight and reclaim its maritime sovereignty in the Indian ocean. India constructed and operationalized the Vizhinjam International Seaport in Kerala. On one side, this project undoubtedly aligns with India's bid for strategic self-reliance, but on the other side the project's underlying fiscal balance is not favourable. The coming years will test India's maritime resilience as it navigates these murky competitive waters.



INTRODUCTION

India was previously heavily dependent on foreign ports for most of its transshipment needs. Until recently, nearly 75% of India's transshipment cargo was handled through overseas hubs such as Colombo, Singapore, and Port Klang 75% of India's transshipment cargo. This translates to approximately 3 million TEUs (Twenty - Foot equivalent) of Indian cargo, which was routed abroad annually through feeder ships transshipment hubs. This combined resulted in US\$200-220 million in lost transshipment revenue for Indian ports and an additional US\$80-100 per container in logistics costs for exporters and importers 3 million TEUs; US\$80-100 per TEU. Beyond this capital outflow, India's strategic autonomy and maritime sovereignty was compromised.

THE HAMBANTOTA WAKE-UP CALL

The crisis at Sri Lanka's Hambantota port, which was driven by high-interest infrastructure loans, created debt distress and forced the Sri Lankan government. To restructure its debt, and reduce the debt burden, Sri Lanka had to lease Hambantota to Beijing for 99 years. This strategic acquisition served as a massive maritime wake-up call for New Delhi, as this acquisition gave China the ultimate leverage to bottleneck India's feeder ship shipments while also allowing it to closely monitor Indian Navy movements.

VIZHINJAM'S STRATEGIC ADVANTAGE IN MARITIME TRANSSHIPMENT

With the construction and operationalization of the Vizinjam port which has a natural draft of 20 meters, Ultra Large Container Vessels (ULCVs) are able to dock without the need for modifications, this helped India reduce its dependence on feeder ships and problems associated with it. In fact, Vizinjam has been capable of handling the largest container ship MSC Irina and other icon class vessels like MSC Türkiye and MSC Michel Cappellini which highlight its leverage and because Vizhinjam is situated at a mere 10 nautical miles from the international East-West shipping route.

By eliminating the necessity to navigate deep into the Arabian Sea or the Bay of Bengal, Vizhinjam serves as a strategic port for vessels transiting between Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia. This also allows India to have a structural advantage in global logistics. It was also beneficial in providing approximately 5500 direct jobs and well connected transportation; the investment was a long term deal rather than a short term speculative attempt.

THE COST OF AMBITION

While the strategic mandate and need for Vizhinjam is undeniable, its financial structure remains a subject of intense debate. The project operates under a Public-Private Partnership (PPP) model driven by the Adani Group. The controversy surrounding Vizhinjam centers on who is bearing the cost, and who stands to benefit?

According to project data, Phase 1 alone consumed ₹8,867 crore. Of this, the Kerala State Government shouldered the most, contributing ₹5,595 crore (roughly 63%).

While the Adani Group invested ₹2,454 crore (28%) and the Central Government provided the remaining funds via Viability Gap Funding (VGF) that was around ₹817.80 crore to bridge the commercial deficit. The need for VGF in this mega project highlights the reality that, despite Vizhinjam's geographic advantages, the mega-project required massive public capital to be commercially attractive to private developers.

The revenue-sharing structure is also a matter of intense debate as until 2034, Kerala Government's direct earnings are essentially limited to GST collections and even after 2034, the state will receive a mere 1% of cargo revenue, a figure that slowly scales up to 40% by 2060 when the operator's tenure concludes, shows a classic case where the state pays the upfront cost, but the private entity gets the immediate and short term benefit from operationalization of the port.

REGIONAL COMPETITION

Vizhinjam is not the only transshipment port in South Asia, it is among the newest and does not operate with a first mover advantage, it is entering a fiercely contested market. In 2025, the Port of Colombo set a historic record with an 8.29 million TEU throughout, functioning as the primary transshipment hub in the Indian Ocean. Further east, Singapore still remains the global leader in maritime cargo as it has handled over 44.66 million TEUs for 2025 and poses advanced technologies.

Against these well established ports, 1 million TEU appears modest considering it is one of the largest port projects in India. However, Colombo is currently operating near its maximum threshold and suffering from congestion.

To effectively compete and generate revenue, Vizhinjam must quickly execute its environmental master plan and scale up subsequent phases to develop an impenetrable hub-and-spoke feeder network.

COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS

- **Fiscal Efficiency:** Kerala Government's substantial ₹5,595 crore contribution represents a significant long term investment and revenue capped at 1% until 2034, the state's payback period is very long until the port picks up operation, And considering the state government needs to further develop cargo terminals and infrastructure and its resources would be strained and as the state is subsidizing private logistics operations.
- **Macroeconomic Externalities:** The port helps reduce the \$200-220 million expenditure annually and with a reduction in logistics costs by up to 30% Indian exporters can leverage a competitive edge in the global market.

OVERALL ANALYSIS

The operationalization of Vizhinjam is an important step toward ending India's maritime subordination. This port acts as a stepping stone for future maritime projects, as it was necessary to stop the annual \$200 million economic loss, increased turnaround times, and the potential geopolitical risks of Hambantota.

With additional projects planned, such as the Great Nicobar Project, this port allows India to improve its interoperability while using its strategic location to attract opportunities for refueling and direct cargo exchange, eventually moving towards a hub-and-spoke model which could generate additional revenues

Additionally, considering the geopolitical premium, the revenue sharing may not be ideal in the short run; however, in the long run, as the operator's term comes to an end, Kerala government would gain a decent share of 40% and revenue share from port operations.

CONCLUSION

The Vizhinjam International Seaport represents India's major and calculated attempt to achieve maritime dominance in the Indian Ocean. By utilizing its 20-meter natural depth and strategic proximity to global shipping lanes, India has developed and is further expanding a port mechanism to retain billions in domestic capital and push back against the foreign monopolization of South Asian trade routes.

Despite these positives, the project has a skewed financial distribution as public funds overwhelmingly handle Phase 1 costs while the private operators gain the early-stage revenues. For Vizhinjam to be a masterstroke rather than a subsidized private asset, it must rapidly expand to phase 2 beyond its current capacity of 1 million TEUs and cultivate a feeder network to siphon traffic from busy port of Colombo, it should simultaneously initiate the development of local industrial corridors in order to truly command a position in the busy market. The coming years will reveal whether this project which was constructed despite known fiscal imbalance will translate into real opportunities or if Vizhinjam will end up as a massive loss for public funds, especially for the Government of Kerala.

AI PARALEGAL AND THE INDIAN LEGAL SYSTEM: NAVIGATING EFFICIENCY, BIAS, AND CONSTITUTIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

LEGAL STUDIES CLUSTER - VRIDHI PARAK



ABSTRACT

In the 21st century, it is impossible to live without consuming food, water and Artificial Intelligence. Its impact is so domineering that it's concluded that in the near future, AI will take your jobs. The professions that practice with justice in the country thought that they were safe from this attempt at domination. However, given certain developments by enthusiastic tech-ventures, the artificial red light has threatened to take over the law. The advent of paralegal AI bots like [jhana.ai](#) has come with the power to rationalize Indian common law, strengthen the stare decisis system and democratize access to legal research. This article argues that while AI-powered legal research tools help overcome the burden of the justice system, they risk enacting an algorithmic colonisation of the law, subtly determining the precedent for the Court, all without regulatory scrutiny and democratic accountability.

The column lays down a four-pronged argument for the same: reinforcement of legal hierarchies at the expense of pluralist and customary legal traditions, reproduction of historical biases embedded in training data, advent of an access-divide of tools to the already privileged and a vacuum in legal education that allows these platforms to enter law schools through peer networks rather than through a critical pedagogy. There is still a long way to go before AI can be used in a way that it doesn't eradicate the social factor of law.

INTRODUCTION

The Indian Legal System has long operated inside a paradox- it sustains a multi-layered, pluralist judicial architecture while simultaneously dealing with a backlog of over 51.5 million pending cases. The Supreme Court alone disposes of tens of thousands of matters each year. High Courts across the country produce a further torrent of decisions, many of which never reach the databases that junior advocates can afford, and some of which conflict openly with each other. Into this landscape of productive chaos, AI legal research tools have arrived as the black-cloaked savior: find the right case, synthesise the applicable ratio, and surface citations in seconds.

The optimistic case for an AI Paralegal rests on the age-old question of the efficiency of the Indian Judicial System. Article 141 of the Indian Constitution binds Supreme Court decisions on all courts throughout India. While it sets in stone an ascending ladder of judicial hierarchy in theory, it dissolves whenever a practitioner cannot locate the dominant precedent, when conflicting decisions from coordinate High Court benches remain unresolved, or every time a district court advocate in a non-tier 1 city lacks a subscription to SCC Online or Manupatra. The bridge between the doctrine of stare decisis and its practical implementation is structural, and it widens the access-gap basis geography and income.

AI Paralegals that can successfully retrieve factually and legally consonant precedents can, in principle, close this gap. Former CJI D.Y.Chandrachud described AI in legal research as a game-changer that empowers legal professionals with unmatched efficiency and accuracy.

A system in which cases wait years for resolution cannot afford to dismiss tools that reduce research time and ease workloads. This gives rise to the problem of who decides what the algorithm finds. The boundaries of what counts as the law or important precedent are drawn by a venture-backed startup operating under commercial incentives that have nothing to do with justice

THE PRIVATISATION OF PRECEDENT

The appropriation of social life by data relations as a new form of extraction goes beyond historical resource colonialism to reshape the very categories through which reality is perceived. In the legal context, when a private platform determines which judgments surface at the top of a search and which sink to page forty, it performs a privatisation of precedents. The paralegal, who may have historical biases embedded in its algorithm, has the power of constitutional impact without its ‘checks and balances’. AI models founded on Global North data and values frequently yield biased outcomes that exacerbate inequalities, prioritising the legal categories of dominant traditions over those of marginalised ones. The legal traditions that AI fails to surface simply become less visible, less citable, and, over time, less legally salient. This leads us to the transparency problem.

This article uses the term ‘algorithmic colonization’ to describe the process by which computational systems, designed and controlled by private technological actors, begin to shape legal knowledge by determining which authorities, interpretations, and categories become discoverable within legal reasoning.

Jhana.ai does not publicly document what its relevance algorithm priorities, how its dataset handles unreported decisions or what its hallucination rates look like at scale. It is incompatible with judicial use. A judiciary whose research is pre-structured by a proprietary algorithm that no party can examine, challenge, or appeal is a judiciary whose historical independence has been partially surrendered to a private actor.

ALGORITHMIC BIAS AND THE REPRODUCTION OF LEGAL INEQUALITIES

Among the poorest 20 per cent of households, only 2.7 per cent have access to a computer and 8.9 percent to internet facilities. The communities most exposed to legal vulnerability (tribal forest rights claimants, domestic workers, migrant laborers, marginalized women navigating personal law, among others) are precisely the communities least likely to benefit from a subscription-based, bandwidth-intensive, knowledge-heavy AI research platform. LLM systems trained on historical legal data inherit the biases of that history.

Indian legal history chronicles caste hierarchy, gendered disproportion, and colonial administrative categories that shaped both the substance and the procedure of law. A model trained on reported decisions from a system that historically underserved Dalit and Adivasi litigants will reproduce the reasoning patterns of that underservice, not correct them. Research on algorithmic bias and data colonialism confirms that algorithmic systems are effective only for populations for which training data exists.

Where training data is sparse, or where it reflects historical patterns of exclusion, the algorithm's outputs replicate and amplify those exclusions.

LEGAL EDUCATION AND THE FUTURE OF PROFESSIONALISM

Perhaps the most underexamined dimension of the AI paralegal revolution is its entry into Indian legal education. Generative AI has not entered Indian law schools through curriculum reform, faculty consensus, or institutional policy. It has entered through peer networks: one student recommending an AI tool to another, sharing prompts, and exam season producing a quiet proliferation of AI-assisted drafts. In India, the Bar Council of India proposed introducing modules on law and technology, but implementation remains pending. In the interim, students use LLM tools to draft memos, produce research summaries, and analyze documents without any structured instruction on what these tools can and cannot do, whose legal epistemologies they encode, or what professional responsibility attaches to their outputs. The danger of dependence this creates is one of phantom precedents and mass unprecedented AI-powered law. A generation of lawyers trained to accept AI outputs as research, rather than as a starting point requiring rigorous verification, will reproduce the artificial assumptions of those tools in their professional practice, which will more or less end in embarrassment.

In Mata v. Avianca, attorneys were sanctioned for submitting a brief that cited six entirely fabricated judicial decisions generated by ChatGPT. The court found that the attorneys had abandoned their professional responsibilities by failing to verify AI-generated outputs through any conventional legal research tool.

More troublingly, when opposing counsel challenged the citations, the attorneys asked ChatGPT to confirm its own output, and the model obligingly confirmed that the hallucinated cases were real. Similarly, India is experiencing a rise of reliance on algorithmically-generated, fabricated judgments in the Courts.

Law schools must respond to this environment not merely by teaching students how to use AI tools, but by teaching them to interrogate those tools. Critical pedagogy in this context means asking foundational questions: Who built this tool? Whose legal traditions informed its training data? What does it exclude, and why? How do I verify its outputs independently? Law schools must adapt curricula to include AI literacy, ethics, and hands-on critical learning, ensuring that students develop the capacity to evaluate and responsibly use AI in legal contexts rather than simply consume its outputs. Anything less is an abdication of the pedagogical function that the legal profession requires.

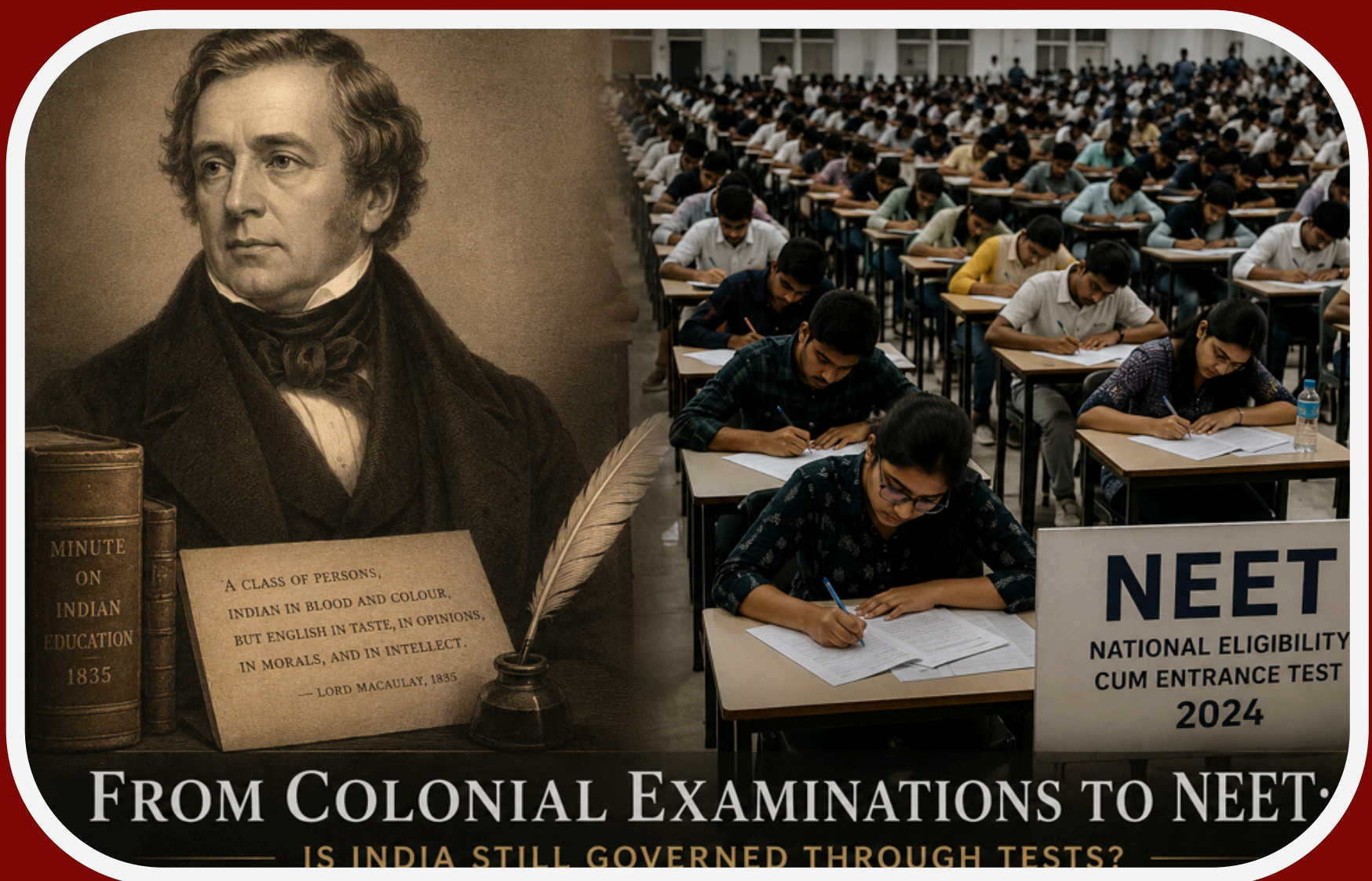
CONCLUSION

The AI paralegal platforms arriving in Indian legal practice are not villains. They address a genuine crisis. An Indian judiciary with 51.5 million pending cases, a research infrastructure that prices out district court practitioners, and a professional culture that demands speed without always rewarding accuracy, does need better tools. But efficiency is not the only value that Indian law must serve. Justice requires that the law be accessible to the subaltern, not just the subscribed and that the lawyers and judges who use these tools do so with eyes open to their assumptions, their exclusions, and their failure modes.

None of this is possible without regulatory action. India requires, at a minimum, three urgent interventions. First, the BCI must issue professional guidance specifying that AI-generated research requires independent verification before citation. Second, the draft Supreme Court's guidelines for transparency and auditability for AI usage in Courts must be implemented. Third, Indian law schools must embed critical AI literacy into their core curricula

PAINT, PIXEL AND PROTEST: THE TRANSFORMATION OF GRAFFITI

**AI & TECHNOLOGY CLUSTER | UTKARSH
SUMAN**



FROM COLONIAL EXAMINATIONS TO NEET:
IS INDIA STILL GOVERNED THROUGH TESTS?

ABSTRACT

Graffiti was once about sweat, risk, leaving some sort of imprint on a world which is not always there. It's now being slowly consumed by machine learning. However, the rawness and rebelliousness of street art are being repurposed into a clean, profitable data asset, through a tool tech giants have been using called algorithmic enclosure. At the same time, smart cities are using automated surveillance and drones to wipe the real thing from a real wall. This article examines how the true sense of graffiti is sublimed from the streets into highly regulated digital walls where state and corporate nexus can easily trap, channelise and divert public sentiments.



INTRODUCTION

In graffiti, there's no style of lettering or colouring. It darts about in the noise of a spray can at midnight, in the rush of a shadowy alley or through uneven pathways. In the past, it has been a powerful statement that people have made by leaving an unauthorized mark, which is to say, "I am here, I matter." Everyone is looking to leave a mark, isn't that right?

It was in World War II when soldiers scribbled "Kilroy Was Here" anywhere they went. Those were not witty gags; they were pained and anguished statements that a real, breathing human being had survived. Sociologist Erving Goffman, in his book "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life", saw society in the 1950s as a giant stage play. The book delves into the idea of everyone having a "front stage" mask, that is, how individuals act at work, in formal institutions, in heavily monitored public streets. All individuals have their real "backstage" selves or real selves, who reside somewhere underneath. Graffiti is when someone tugs their backstage persona into the spotlight. Graffiti creators are no different than we commoners. The only difference is that they have successfully channelised a way to present their inner selves in the best possible manner. However, their ways, their acts, are under threat of extinction.

In the current landscape, the fight isn't just with paint, it's with digital light as cities become more policed. Street artists are now swapping out spray cans for lasers and projectors, called Digital Projection Bombing. The genius of the trick is that it avoids the normal rules and practices of paintballing; now, no paint comes in contact with the brick!

However, the spirit of rebellion remains the same. The artist continues to load another populist message against the evil corporate and institutional power.

They are transforming perceptions of the building in ways that do not permanently alter the physicality of the building, but the transition to digital has also opened the door to a massive and automated attack from the State.

THE RISE OF THE MACHINE

Modern smart cities have installed large surveillance networks to take the task of locating and eliminating graffiti. Today, the city's walls are monitored by artificial intelligence, all day long. Systems like advanced AI vision are directly connected to CCTV cameras and street sweepers. These models continuously scan the urban surfaces and get active in milliseconds. The twist is that AI is the final judge of whether an unauthorized mark is "illegal graffiti" or "protected art."

Cities work with aerospace firms like Aquiline Drones for mechanized removal, with aerial, paint-spraying drones. These drones hover above walls and paint tags mechanically, precisely using lasers and sensors. Adrenaline, sweat, all fade away as a machine scans the streets. The human component is completely and totally supplanted with the cold and calculating efficiency of an autonomous robot.

THE THEFT OF AUTHENTICITY

City droids destroy the physical art, and the tech companies steal its heart. Generative AI models are trained with billions of pictures downloaded and collected from the internet, taking in decades of street culture without ever seeking permission or compensation from the original artists. Now, a corporate graphic designer can just type in a prompt, "gritty urban graffiti background", and get an AI-generated safe, sterile version of street art ready for a commercial. This takes the fun out of graffiti.

Real street art is respected throughout because the people know what it takes, they know the risk factor, the legal risk, and the physical risk, which eventually helps them to connect with the ideas of the artist. Creating an image with AI is effortless and risk-free. It has the appeal of anarchy, the appeal to dissent, resistance and rebellion, but it's completely empty, which is to say, it's about the preservation of the intellectual property of a tech firm, and the removal of creators who have created that culture and made it their own. It is like a euphemistic and clean version of street graffiti, which just has a name value and nothing else.

As real world surveillance makes traditional painting too risky, street artists are turning to augmented reality apps like Gestobrush to project virtual 3D tags onto buildings, landmarks, and even corporate headquarters. On the surface it may feel like total freedom, like countless digital canvases and graffiti on properties without facing any law, but it is actually a brilliant trap known as augmented enclosure. Those digital pixels do not float freely in public space, but they live entirely on private servers owned by the same corporate and tech giants. Now they can instantly delete any virtual mark that threatens their safety and policies. The same graffiti which symbolized dissent and street rebellion is now turned into a sterile, heavy moderated corporate asset.

ADVERSARIAL HAND STYLES

Realizing that the virtual space is completely rigged, human creativity, in no time, found a way to strike back. Street artists are now turning the very technology AI uses to feed itself into an adversarial weapon.

The modern smart city's greatest assets are its automated computer vision models which scan public spaces to detect graffiti and calculate a "confidence score"— a mathematical guess of how certain the AI is of what it's looking at.

If that score crosses a developer's established threshold, the system flags the wall for immediate erasure. To counter this, artists are manipulating these networks by using sharp, distorted geometric patterns, broken typographic loops, high-contrast borders, and infrared-reflective pigments in their paint. To a human passerby, the result may look like a complex, gritty piece of graffiti, but to an automated camera, these visual disruptions crash the system's processing logic. The moment the lens hits and scans the infrared-painted art, the internal math fails and the system malfunctions; the algorithm can no longer make out the graffiti and instead misinterprets the art as a harmless shadow or an odd brick pattern.

The physical warfare on the concrete walls runs parallel to the war waged online. Across the internet, creators are deploying tools like Nightshade data poisoning to inject invisible 'poison pixels' into the images which AI scrapers hunt for.

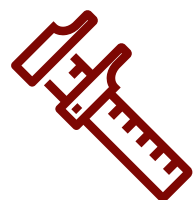
When these poisoned images are ingested into a dataset, the corrupted pixels in it scramble the software's internal logic from the inside, thus mathematically convincing the machine that a raw piece of street art is actually a clean corporate logo or a text document. Hence, the contemporary street artist no longer just dodges the police in dark alleys; they are actively dodging and blinding the artificial intelligence too. An art form which remains entirely invisible to the algorithm is loudly visible and broadcast to an average man standing on the street.

CONCLUSION

When technology wasn't around, the best leveller was a spray paint can. It gave the people, the unknown artists, a way to channelize and articulate against societal disparities. Every mark left by these street artists is a manifestation of "Kilroy was here". The artistic expressions of these anonymous artists distinguish them. Their individual identity is derived by spray paint can, thus acting as a metaphorical leveller. It gave these artists, the people who lived off the grid, an opportunity to redefine their individuality, to become visible on the front stage before the public. That was an act of rebellion at a time when calculations were performed by hand, and now a simple act of defiance contrasts with the infinite calculations that are silently performed today from the depths of corporate servers.

Though they tried their best in distorting graffiti and categorizing legal and illegal, modern artists too have evolved and co-opted with new techniques to counter it. The fight to preserve the true sense of graffiti, being an art of dissent and discontent, will continue as long as the corporate and institutional nexus does not deliver a true sense of justice and democracy.

FROM COLONIAL EXAMINATIONS TO NEET: IS INDIA STILL GOVERNED THROUGH TESTS?

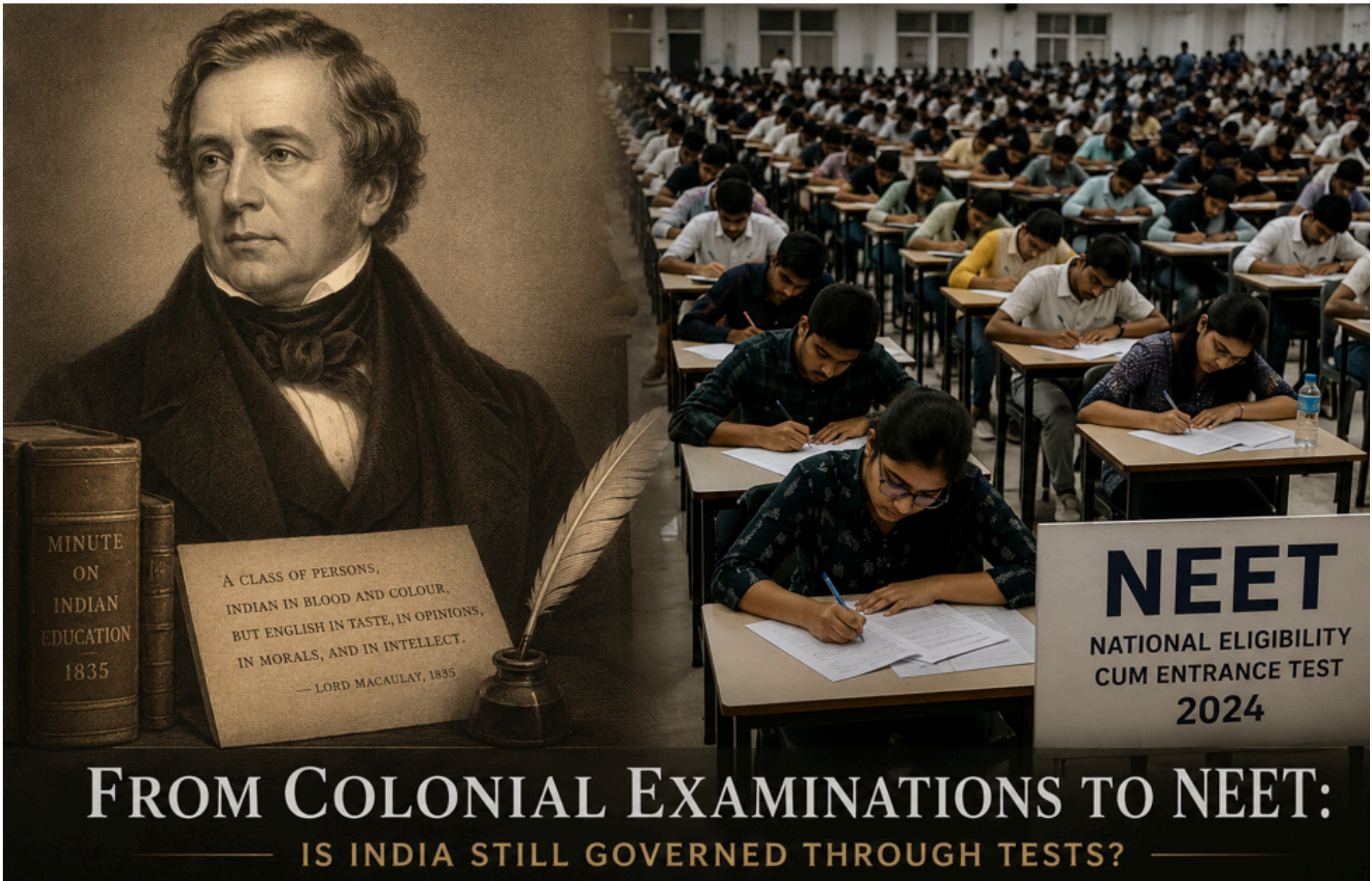


PUBLIC POLICY- AKSHARA GUPTA

Abstract

In 1835, a British politician named Thomas Babington Macaulay stood before the Governor-General of India and presented a document that would shape the subcontinent for the next two centuries. His well known Minute on Indian Education” did not just sketch out a curriculum, it proposed the creation of a class. Macaulay imagined making Indians who were, in his own words,“Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect”. The instrument he chose to build this class was the examination.

Nearly two hundred years later, on a sweltering morning, 21st June 2026, around 2 million young Indians sat down to write the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test— usually called NEET — the only gateway to medical education in the country. It was a Retest, too. The test would soon spill into a national scandal, with claims of paper leaks, inflated marks, and deep, systemic corruption. Still, behind the noise of the headlines there is a big question of accountability, is this only a testing crisis, or is it the latest form of an older pattern — one where India’s ruling machinery has always used examinations not only to select talent, but to arrange, label, and ultimately control its population.



INTRODUCTION

The British did not invent examinations as a neutral tool of assessment. In colonial India, the civil service examination was, at the same time a gateway and, a gate, not just one thing. When the East India Company tried to run its huge territorial holdings in the subcontinent, it needed a professional section of bureaucrats, loyal, English speaking, and predictable. Hence, the answer was a competitive examination system.

The nomination method for the Indian Civil Service (ICS) was abolished by the British Parliament in 1853, and it was replaced by competitive tests open to British subjects “without distinction of race.” On paper, it sounded like this could let anyone in, including Indians. But the syllabus leaned hard on Greek, Latin, and English literature, which were subjects that were really only accessible to those trained in British schools. Also, the age rule, it was set between 18 and 23 years, and that made it nearly impossible for Indian candidates to go to England, learn the required material, and compete on the same terms, as if it was truly on equal footing.

The very first ICS examination was held in 1855, institutionalising what the Northcote-Trevelyan Report of 1854 had proposed: an open, merit based civil service. Yet the exam was never about meritocracy as people say. In colonial India, these ICS examinations, selected for what some scholars have called “character” — for example self-denial, diligence, temperance, and self-control were coveted bureaucratic traits. The whole system somehow ensured that those who climbed up through it were culturally in line with British governance, not just intellectually competent. Despite all the talk about merit, no Indian was appointed to the ICS until 1863.

MACAULAY’S VISION: GOVERNING AN ENGINEERING CLASS

“A class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.” — Lord Macaulay, Minute on Indian Education, 1835

The intellectual scaffolding behind the colonial examination culture was put up by Macaulay almost two decades before the very first ICS exam. His 1835 “Minute on Indian Education” functioned like a programme of administrative engineering, if you think about it. Macaulay said it pretty clearly: education and examination would create “intermediaries”, between us and the millions whom we govern. And those intermediaries would be a kind of buffer class; enough anglicised to run British rule, enough Indian to make that rule look more legitimate.

What Macaulay proposed was not education in the humanist manner. It was classification in the bureaucratic sense. The “Downward Filtration Theory” in his scheme claimed that educating a small, chosen group of Indians would eventually trickle down and help the larger masses.

In practice, the result was a reshaping of Indian society around who could reach a particular sort of knowledge — knowledge that was defined and kept under control by the colonial state. To pass the examination was to belong; to fail it was to stay outside, ungoverned, or if we’re being precise, to stay the governed rather than becoming the governing.

POST-INDEPENDENCE INDIA: INHERITING THE FRAME

When India gained independence in 1947, the examination state did not really wither— it was rather enthusiastically picked up. Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, India’s first Home Minister, used to describe the Indian Administrative Service as the ‘steel frame’ of the nation.

In the Constituent Assembly debates of October 1949, he insisted that without a solid All-India Service, ‘the Union will go; you will not have a united India.’

Even so, there were voices that wanted to dismantle the ICS structure, as if it were just a colonial relic. Patel overruled them, and the colonial infrastructure of competitive examinations was turned into something for a democratic nation; at least in theory, it was meant to be open to all castes and classes, while reservations for Scheduled Castes and Tribes were introduced as a formal corrective to historical exclusion.

NEET AND THE NEW GATEKEEPING

The National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) was introduced in 2013, taking over after the All-India Pre-Medical Test (AIPMT), and it sort of turned into the one and only nationwide entrance exam for getting into undergraduate medical programmes in India. The idea behind NEET is kind of democratic on the surface, meaning one test, one standard, equal access. It even feels like it is echoing that old colonial promise from 1853, when the examinations were claimed to be conducted “without distinction of race.”

A 2023 survey, which interviewed 38 of the top 50 NEET rankers, reported that all but one had gone through some sort of coaching. In that top group, 29 were from the general (non-reserved) category, and 37 had studied in urban-area schools, and they said they spent quite a lot of money on paid coaching programmes. Critics, including commentators for The Hindu, argue that NEET has effectively encouraged a coaching industry which tends to reward the well-off, those in cities, and people from historically dominant castes.

On paper, the idea of NEET looks democratic enough: one test, one rule, equal access. It also seems to echo a colonial promise from 1853—examinations “without distinction of race.” Yet, just like the colonial ICS arrangement, the neat, formal equality of the examination ends up hiding a deeper, structural imbalance in who can prepare well enough.

THE SCANDAL WITHIN THE SYSTEM

The contradictions kind of reached crisis point in 2024. On 5 May 2024, roughly 2.4 million candidates across India sat the NEET-UG examination, and within days after the results, everything went sideways. There was a commotion—an unusual 67 students supposedly got perfect scores, which felt like a statistical anomaly, so suspicion kicked in fast. Allegations came forward about paper leaks, with question sets reportedly being passed around on WhatsApp through coaching centres in Rajasthan and Bihar. Police in Patna then arrested thirteen people, including four examinees. The Central Bureau of Investigation later said it had identified 155 students who were said to have benefited directly from the leak.

This 2024 controversy wasn’t a lone occurrence. In the years before, NEET had repeatedly been shadowed by disruptions, including claims of cheating, corruption, and paper leaks. Recently, in 2026, the same story sort of played again: the NEET-UG exam held on 3 May 2026 for more than 2.27 million aspirants was cancelled on 12 May. It was cancelled after probes pointed to major overlaps between a pre-circulated guess paper and the real question paper, and that, in turn, resulted in arrests of insiders linked to the National Testing Agency itself.

In other words, the exam wasn't only failing to choose the most suitable candidates; it had become a kind of marketplace where access to "correct answers" could be bought. That basically mimicked the corruption the system was meant to replace, but in a smaller, tighter form. Thousands of students who had prepared honestly were stuck in limbo. And by the time the 2026 re-tests came, media reports said at least eleven students died by suicide in the run up, which is honestly hard to put into words.

THE CONTINUITY OF THE EXAMINATION STATE

It would be facile to draw a straight line from Macaulay's 1835 Minute to the 2026 NEET scandal and just call them the same phenomenon, like one continuous thing. But the contexts are radically different: colonial subjugation is not the same as post-colonial state administration, even if that administration is clearly flawed. Independent India's examination system operates within a constitutional framework, which is committed to social justice, affirmative action, and democratic representation. Those are not trivial distinctions,

Still, some structural continuities are hard to ignore. The colonial examination was somehow selecting cultural alignment with the ruling order — it was a merit test, yes, but it also ended up being a class test. The contemporary Indian examination system selects for access to a particular kind of preparation, and again it is a merit test that also happens to be a class test. In both cases, the examination kind of presents itself as neutral, while quietly encoding the advantages of those who were already advantaged.

CONCLUSION

India is not governed by examinations in any simple or conspiratorial sense. Still, it is governed through a logic that examinations carry around with them: the notion that one single, standardized assessment can carry out objective, fair, and final verdicts on human potential. This logic arrived with colonialism, was taken over at independence, and then it got even more entrenched along with liberalisation. The examination has become one of the primary languages through which the Indian state negotiates access—government jobs, medical education, engineering colleges, bureaucratic power.

Therefore, the NEET scandal of 2024 and 2026 is not an aberration. It is a disclosure. Fixing India's examination culture will need more than upgraded security protocols or a more transparent testing agency. It will ask for a reckoning with that colonial inheritance, the one that made the exam a master key of Indian governance, and then an honest audit of who that key was always meant to open doors for.

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Newsletter
2026