



Editorial

The four articles and a book review in this issue are an amalgamation of academic contributions spanning governance, history, gender, welfare, and education. Debating relevant social concerns, the issue reflects how social science scholarship potentially evokes pathways for social change.

The article ‘South African municipal performance through the lens of Batho Pele Principles: A public perspective’ examines municipal performance in South Africa by applying the Batho Pele, i.e., “People First” principles as an evaluative framework, focusing on public perceptions over bureaucratic self-assessments. Using data from the South African Social Attitude Survey (SASAS) from 2007 to 2020, the study constructs a Batho Pele Index (BPI) to evaluate responsiveness, accountability, and service. By shifting the lens from institutional compliance to citizen evaluation, the article affirms the pertinent relevance of Batho Pele as a people-centred benchmark, by providing policy-makers with evidence-based evaluation. Expanding the existing literature on public management and governance, the study stresses the need for improved training, assessment, monitoring, and leadership capacity in municipalities, alongside strategies that foster genuine accountability and participation.

The second article in this issue, ‘Exploring Exclusion: Understanding Marginalisation in the Third Gender Community of Haryana’, investigates the ongoing marginalisation of the Third Gender community in Haryana despite landmark legal recognition through the 2014 NALSA judgment and the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act of 2019. Using a mixed-method approach—20 focus group participants and a survey of 105 respondents—the research points to the persistence of stigma, discrimination, and exclusion. The study finds that interpersonal factors and systemic barriers to education, employment, and healthcare continue to confine many individuals to precarious livelihoods. Drawing on Goffman’s stigma theory, social exclusion theory, and Bourdieu’s concepts of symbolic violence and habitus, the article proposes various welfare interventions and articulates the need for genuine social acceptance and not just a legal reform of the issues of the Third Gender community.

This article, ‘An exploration of the political, economic and social dimensions of South Africa’s bilateral relations with China’, offers a detailed exploration of South Africa’s evolving bilateral relationship with China, analysing it through political, economic, and social dimensions. China, now the world’s second-largest economy, has become Africa’s largest trading partner, with South Africa as its key ally. The study uses

semi-structured interviews with 20 diplomats, leaders, academics, and civil society representatives. This is further supplemented by secondary sources to assess the benefits and challenges of the partnership. The findings show that the economic relationship is highly asymmetrical. Drawing from the extensive findings, the study argues that South Africa must move beyond dependency and design coherent policies to balance its engagements. Taking this discussion beyond media generalisations, the study offers an extensive evidence-based analysis of how South Africa might transform its relationship with China into one of greater reciprocity and long-term benefit.

The fourth article, titled 'Navigating Global Leadership Models: Empowering Sri Lankan Teachers as Transformative Leaders in Education,' explores the contextualised and adequate adaptation of global leadership models within Sri Lankan secondary school teachers to empower them as transformative leaders in education. The study argues for the contextualization of international frameworks that blindly adopt the same because the concept of a teacher includes various dimensions of being moral guides and community leaders. This dual role enunciates the need for leadership models that integrate both professional and cultural dimensions. The study resorted to a critical evaluation and review of these conceptual frameworks to delineate the structural barriers that constrain the exclusivity of the teacher leadership concept. The article calls out the Western bias within transformational leadership theory and its projection of the "heroic leader" concept. It proposes that empowering teachers as transformative leaders can improve instructional practices, foster cooperation, and enhance student outcomes while driving sustainable school reform.

The book review section highlights William Dalrymple's *The Golden Road* as a work of scholarship and extraordinary narrative that repositions India at the heart of global civilisation. Covering the "indigenous millennium" from 250 BCE to 1200 CE, Dalrymple traces the expansion of an "Indosphere" stretching from the Roman Empire in the west to China, Japan, and Korea in the east. Through merchants, monks, and scholars, India influenced maritime trade, shaping economic networks and intellectual traditions far beyond the subcontinent. The review articulates how Dalrymple documents India's economic centrality through accounts of Indo-Roman trade. Delineating the visibility of extensive fieldwork, the review highlights how his work foregrounds India's maritime networks and soft power by challenging Eurocentric historiography. The reviewer also acknowledged the book as a rewriting of the global historiography that validates India's interconnected and vibrant past, all of which Dalrymple effortlessly articulates via an amalgamation of extensive academic scholarship and evocative narrativization.

Taken collectively, these five works demonstrate the power of research to question assumptions and set conventions, and through that foreground neglected perspectives. Each of these articles, either via historical rewriting, policy critique, or social analysis, in one way or another, proposes strategies for more inclusivity. The vibrant insights are thus a statement that academic scholarship should go beyond diagnosing concerns by facilitating society to transform as well.

I wish to convey my sincere appreciation to all the authors, reviewers, and Editorial Assistants, Aneetta Alexander and Albeena Stephen, for their significant contributions to publishing this issue of Artha. Additionally, I would like to recognise and praise the support offered by Dr Malavika Menon, Coordinator, and Mr Jery Mathew, Administrative Assistant, from the Centre for Publications at CHRIST (Deemed to be University). My heartfelt thanks extend to all the officials at CHRIST for their unwavering support and encouragement for the Artha Journal of Social Sciences (AJSS).

We sincerely thank the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), New Delhi, for its Grant-in-Aid supporting the publication of this issue.

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Artha Journal of Social Sciences