International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)
E-ISSN: 2582-2160 ● Website: www.ijfmr.com ● Email: editor@ijfmr.com

Human Security in the 21st Century: India's Negotiation with Non-Traditional Threats, Governance Gaps, and Policy Futures

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Abstract

Background: The concept of human security has fundamentally reoriented security studies away from territorial defense toward the protection of individuals from persistent, non-traditional threats. In the 21st century, India faces a dense and interlocking array of such threats, including economic precarity, health system fragility, educational degradation, gendered vulnerability, and institutional governance deficits. Despite sustained policy expansion and democratic legitimacy, human security outcomes remain uneven, revealing deep structural constraints.

Objective: This paper critically examines India's human security landscape by analyzing how non-traditional threats are generated, mediated, and reproduced through governance arrangements, institutional capacity, and policy design. It advances the argument that India's human security challenges stem less from resource scarcity and more from fragmented, compliance-oriented governance that insufficiently centers human well-being, trust, and institutional ethics.

Methods: The study adopts a qualitative, analytical approach grounded in political economy and public policy analysis. It synthesizes human security theory with sectoral evidence drawn from education, labour, public health, and gender-focused policy domains. The analysis integrates insights from empirical and conceptual scholarship on governance, institutional climate, professional well-being, and policy implementation in the Indian context.

Results: The analysis reveals that non-traditional security threats in India are not discrete or episodic but structurally embedded and mutually reinforcing. Educational stress, occupational insecurity, gendered labour vulnerability, and declining organizational trust emerge as critical yet under-theorized dimensions of human security. Governance cultures, leadership practices, and institutional value systems play a decisive role in shaping these outcomes, frequently intensifying vulnerability rather than mitigating it. While digital governance and emerging technologies offer significant potential to enhance service delivery and inclusion, they also risk reproducing exclusion and surveillance-driven control in the absence of ethical, human-centric frameworks.

Conclusion: Reframing human security in India requires a decisive shift from state-centric control paradigms toward governance models rooted in institutional ethics, professional well-being, and social

trust. Human security must be treated as a foundational outcome of governance rather than a residual policy concern. By foregrounding the institutional and governance determinants of insecurity, this paper contributes to security studies and public policy scholarship and offers an integrative framework for advancing human security in large, diverse democracies.

Keywords: Human Security; Non-Traditional Threats; Governance; Public Policy; India; Institutional Capacity; Social Vulnerability

1. Introduction: Reframing Security Beyond the State

Security, long understood as the preservation of territorial sovereignty and military capability, has undergone a profound conceptual reorientation in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The limitations of state-centric security paradigms became increasingly evident as large segments of the global population continued to experience chronic insecurity in the absence of war or external aggression. Poverty, unemployment, public health crises, environmental degradation, educational exclusion, gender-based violence, and institutional decay emerged as pervasive threats to human survival and dignity, prompting scholars and policymakers alike to reconsider what security truly means in contemporary societies.

The articulation of *human security* marked a decisive break from traditional security thinking by shifting the referent object of security from the state to the individual. Rather than privileging borders and coercive capacity, human security emphasizes freedom from fear, freedom from want, and the conditions necessary for individuals to live lives of agency and dignity. Since its formal introduction in global policy discourse, the concept has been both influential and contested, praised for its normative breadth while critiqued for analytical looseness and operational ambiguity (UNDP, 1994; Paris, 2001; Kaldor, 2007). Yet, despite these debates, human security has proven particularly salient for developing democracies where formal political stability often coexists with deep social and institutional vulnerabilities.

India represents a compelling and analytically significant case in this regard. As the world's largest democracy and a rapidly transforming economy, India has expanded its policy reach across welfare provisioning, digital governance, education reform, and public health. At the same time, it continues to confront entrenched non-traditional security threats that disproportionately affect women, informal workers, children, and marginalized communities. Economic growth has not translated uniformly into economic security; institutional expansion has not consistently produced institutional trust; and policy proliferation has not ensured human well-being. These contradictions position India not as an exceptional case, but as a revealing one for understanding the governance foundations of human security in complex, plural societies.

Existing scholarship on security in India has largely focused on conventional threats, border management, and internal conflict, while studies on development and welfare have often remained siloed from security analysis. This separation obscures the reality that insecurity in contemporary India is less a product of episodic shocks and more the outcome of cumulative governance failures, institutional stress, and uneven policy implementation. Human security threats in India manifest through everyday experiences: precarious employment in the informal sector, overburdened public health systems, declining educational

quality, gendered exposure to violence and exclusion, and administrative cultures that prioritize compliance over care (Sen, 1999; Dreze & Sen, 2013; Standing, 2011).

Recent governance-oriented studies further suggest that institutional climate, leadership practices, and professional well-being significantly shape service delivery outcomes and public trust, thereby influencing human security in indirect but powerful ways. Research on education and public institutions in India highlights how organizational stress, weak leadership ethics, and misaligned accountability mechanisms erode both professional performance and citizen outcomes, producing a silent but persistent form of insecurity (Ball, 2003; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Within this literature, emerging work has begun to link policy design and institutional culture to broader human development outcomes, underscoring the need to integrate governance analysis into human security frameworks.

This paper builds on and extends these insights by advancing three interrelated arguments. First, it contends that non-traditional security threats in India are structurally embedded rather than episodic, arising from the interaction of policy fragmentation, institutional overload, and socio-economic inequality. Second, it argues that governance arrangements, particularly leadership practices, professional value orientations, and administrative cultures, play a decisive role in either mitigating or amplifying human insecurity. Third, it suggests that contemporary policy responses, including digital governance and artificial intelligence-driven interventions, represent a double-edged development: offering efficiency and reach while risking new forms of exclusion and ethical deficit if not anchored in human-centric principles (Floridi et al., 2018; Eubanks, 2018).

By situating India's experience within the broader human security literature and grounding the analysis in governance and institutional dynamics, this study seeks to bridge the analytical divide between security studies and public policy scholarship. Drawing on prior empirical and conceptual research on education, labour, gender, institutional climate, and governance in India (Sheokand, 2017; Sheokand, 2018a; Sheokand, 2025), the paper reframes human security not as a residual outcome of development but as a core indicator of governance quality. In doing so, it positions human security as a defining challenge for large, diverse democracies navigating the pressures of economic transformation, social inequality, and institutional reform in the 21st century.

2. Conceptual Foundations of Human Security

2.1 The Evolution of Human Security Thinking

The emergence of human security as a conceptual framework marked a deliberate challenge to orthodox security studies, which had long privileged military capability, territorial integrity, and geopolitical balance. The post–Cold War period exposed the inadequacy of these approaches in explaining why large populations continued to experience insecurity in contexts devoid of armed conflict. Development failures, social exclusion, institutional breakdowns, and public health crises demonstrated that threats to survival and dignity often originate within states rather than beyond their borders.

Human security reframed the referent object of security from the state to the individual, emphasizing protection against chronic threats and sudden disruptions that undermine human life and agency. Early formulations stressed multidimensionality, encompassing economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security. This broadened lens aligned security analysis with human

development thinking, particularly capability-based approaches that foreground what individuals are effectively able to be and do (Sen, 1999; Alkire, 2003).

Yet, this conceptual expansion also generated sustained debate. Critics argued that human security risked becoming analytically diffuse, normatively expansive, and difficult to operationalize. Concerns were raised that "security" stretched too far could lose its explanatory power, absorbing nearly all development concerns without clear prioritization or causal clarity (Paris, 2001). Others cautioned that the moral appeal of human security might mask power asymmetries and legitimize technocratic or interventionist governance under the banner of protection (Duffield, 2007).

Despite these critiques, human security has endured precisely because it captures a fundamental empirical reality: insecurity in contemporary societies is increasingly experienced through everyday institutional interactions rather than exceptional events. This insight is particularly relevant in contexts where democratic institutions exist but fail to translate formal rights into substantive protections.

2.2 Human Security and the Governance Turn

As the human security literature matured, attention shifted from cataloguing threats to interrogating the governance structures through which insecurity is produced or mitigated. This "governance turn" recognizes that human security outcomes are shaped less by the presence of policies and more by how institutions function, coordinate, and exercise authority. Administrative capacity, leadership norms, accountability mechanisms, and professional ethics emerged as central variables linking policy intent to lived experience.

Public policy scholarship has long demonstrated that implementation deficits, fragmented authority, and compliance-oriented administrative cultures systematically weaken state responsiveness, particularly in large and diverse democracies (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984; Peters, 2015; Fukuyama, 2014). When viewed through a human security lens, these governance failures translate directly into insecurity: delayed services become health risks, poor school governance becomes intergenerational disadvantage, and weak regulatory oversight becomes economic precarity.

Within this analytical frame, institutions are not neutral delivery mechanisms but active mediators of security. Organizational climate, professional motivation, and leadership practices shape how policies are interpreted and enacted on the ground. Empirical studies across education and public service systems demonstrate that trust, ethical leadership, and professional value orientation significantly influence both performance and beneficiary outcomes (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

Recent Indian scholarship reinforces this insight by linking institutional functioning to broader social outcomes. Analyses of educational governance, rights-based legislation, and administrative reforms reveal persistent gaps between policy ambition and institutional capacity, resulting in uneven human development outcomes despite formal legal guarantees (Sheokand, 2017; Sheokand, 2023). These findings underscore the importance of examining human security not only as a policy objective but as an institutional achievement.

2.3 Human Security in Developing Democracies: Structural Constraints and Social Vulnerability

Human security acquires distinct contours in developing democracies, where electoral legitimacy often coexists with deep socio-economic inequality and administrative overload. Unlike fragile states, these

systems possess functioning institutions, but those institutions frequently operate under conditions of resource strain, political pressure, and conflicting mandates. As a result, insecurity is rarely absolute; instead, it is unevenly distributed across regions, social groups, and life stages.

Social vulnerability in such contexts is shaped by structural factors including labour informalization, gendered divisions of work, uneven access to quality education, and differential exposure to risk. Scholars have shown that insecurity accumulates through everyday institutional failures rather than dramatic breakdowns, producing what has been described as "normalized precarity" (Standing, 2011). This form of insecurity is particularly difficult to address because it is embedded in routine governance practices and often rendered invisible by aggregate indicators.

In India, these dynamics are evident in sectors central to human security. Education systems struggle with administrative compliance pressures and declining professional morale; labour markets absorb risk through informal employment; and social policy implementation varies sharply across states and communities. Research examining professional well-being and organizational climate within public institutions highlights how systemic stress erodes service quality and weakens the protective role of the state, especially for vulnerable populations (Sheokand, 2024; Sheokand & Borad, 2025).

Importantly, these vulnerabilities are not merely social outcomes but security concerns insofar as they constrain human agency, dignity, and resilience. A human security framework attentive to governance and institutions thus enables a more precise diagnosis of why democratic systems may fail to deliver substantive security despite formal inclusion.

2.4 Technology, Ethics, and the Future of Human Security

The expansion of digital governance and artificial intelligence introduces new possibilities and risks for human security. On one hand, technology promises improved service delivery, expanded access, and enhanced state capacity. On the other, it raises ethical concerns related to surveillance, exclusion, algorithmic bias, and the erosion of human judgment in public decision-making.

Scholars of digital ethics caution that without normative safeguards, technological systems may reproduce existing inequalities under the guise of efficiency (Eubanks, 2018; Zuboff, 2019). From a human security perspective, the critical question is not whether technology enhances capacity, but whether it strengthens human dignity, agency, and institutional trust.

Emerging governance-focused analyses in the Indian context argue that technological interventions must be embedded within ethical, human-centric policy frameworks to avoid amplifying vulnerability (Sheokand, 2018b, 2025). This insight reinforces the central claim of this paper: that human security is ultimately a function of governance values and institutional design rather than technical capability alone.

3. Mapping India's Non-Traditional Security Threat Landscape

Non-traditional security threats in India do not emerge as isolated shocks but as cumulative outcomes of socio-economic transformation, demographic pressure, and uneven institutional capacity. While policy discourse often treats these threats as sector-specific challenges, a human security lens reveals their deep interconnections and shared governance roots. Economic vulnerability, health insecurity, educational

stress, gendered exposure to risk, and environmental precarity intersect to shape everyday insecurity for large segments of the population.

3.1 Economic Insecurity and Labour Precarity

Economic insecurity constitutes one of the most pervasive dimensions of human insecurity in contemporary India. Despite sustained economic growth, employment generation has remained uneven, with a significant proportion of the workforce concentrated in informal and semi-formal arrangements characterized by low wages, limited social protection, and high exposure to risk. The informalisation of labour has effectively transferred economic uncertainty from firms and the state to households, normalizing precarity as a lived condition.

Labour economists have noted that employment insecurity in developing economies operates less through open unemployment and more through underemployment, casualization, and income volatility (ILO, 2018; World Bank, 2019). These dynamics disproportionately affect women, migrant workers, and first-generation urban households, amplifying existing inequalities. From a human security perspective, such conditions erode not only material well-being but also future capability formation, as economic stress constrains access to education, health care, and stable living conditions.

Empirical analyses of occupational stress and well-being within Indian institutional settings further suggest that economic insecurity is closely linked to organizational environments and leadership practices. Research examining occupational well-being highlights how workload pressures, role ambiguity, and limited institutional support translate into psychological strain and reduced resilience, reinforcing cycles of vulnerability (Sheokand, 2025).

3.2 Health Security and Systemic Fragility

Health insecurity in India reflects long-standing structural weaknesses rather than temporary system overload. While recent crises have drawn attention to public health capacity, underlying challenges related to access, quality, and equity remain persistent. Large sections of the population continue to rely on out-of-pocket expenditure for basic health services, rendering illness a major driver of household insecurity.

Public health scholars emphasize that health security depends not only on medical infrastructure but on governance factors such as regulatory oversight, intergovernmental coordination, and trust in public institutions (Baru et al., 2010; WHO, 2022). Inadequate primary care, uneven state capacity, and urban–rural disparities compound vulnerability, particularly for women and children. Health shocks often cascade into economic and educational disruptions, illustrating the interdependence of human security domains.

The human security implications of health system fragility extend beyond mortality and morbidity. Chronic uncertainty regarding access to care undermines psychological security and social trust, weakening the protective role of the state. This reinforces the argument that health security must be understood as an institutional outcome rather than a purely technical challenge.

3.3 Educational Insecurity and Intergenerational Risk

Education occupies a central position within the human security framework due to its role in shaping long-term capability, agency, and social mobility. In India, however, educational expansion has been accompanied by persistent concerns regarding quality, governance, and professional sustainability.

Administrative overload, compliance-driven accountability, and declining professional morale have increasingly constrained educational effectiveness.

Comparative education research suggests that educational insecurity often manifests not through exclusion alone but through low-quality inclusion that fails to deliver meaningful learning outcomes (UNESCO, 2021). In the Indian context, governance pressures and institutional stress within schools and higher education institutions have been shown to affect teacher performance, organizational climate, and student experience.

Analytical work on institutional climate and job satisfaction within educational settings highlights how leadership practices and administrative cultures indirectly shape educational security by influencing motivation, trust, and professional commitment (Sheokand & Dhola, 2025). When education systems function under chronic stress, they generate intergenerational insecurity by limiting students' future economic and social options.

3.4 Gendered Insecurity and Social Vulnerability

Gender remains a defining axis along which human insecurity is experienced in India. Women's exposure to economic precarity, unsafe work environments, unpaid care burdens, and violence reflects structural inequalities embedded within both social norms and institutional arrangements. Gendered insecurity is thus not a peripheral concern but a central indicator of human security failure.

Feminist political economy scholarship emphasizes that women's insecurity is often intensified by policy blind spots that treat households as homogeneous units and undervalue care work (Agarwal, 1997; Kabeer, 2012). In India, gaps between legal protections and lived realities continue to undermine women's safety, dignity, and autonomy.

Empirical research on crime, work, and social protection underscores how weak enforcement, institutional apathy, and fragmented policy responses sustain gendered vulnerability. Analyses of violence and insecurity faced by women reveal the limits of formal legislation in the absence of institutional accountability and cultural change (Sheokand, 2017b , 2017c). From a human security standpoint, gendered insecurity reflects the failure of governance systems to protect bodily integrity and social participation.

3.5 Environmental Stress and Everyday Insecurity

Environmental degradation and climate-related stress increasingly intersect with human security in India, particularly for rural populations and urban informal settlements. Water scarcity, air pollution, heat stress, and climate-induced livelihood disruption threaten health, income, and social stability.

Environmental security scholars argue that climate risks function as threat multipliers, intensifying existing socio-economic vulnerabilities rather than producing entirely new ones (IPCC, 2022). In India, environmental stress disproportionately affects those with the least adaptive capacity, reinforcing inequality and migration pressures.

From a governance perspective, environmental insecurity exposes coordination failures across sectors and levels of government. When environmental risks are addressed through fragmented or short-term policy responses, they translate into chronic insecurity for affected communities.

Section Synthesis

Taken together, these domains illustrate that non-traditional security threats in India are deeply interconnected and institutionally mediated. Economic precarity feeds health and educational insecurity; gendered vulnerability cuts across labour and safety; environmental stress amplifies existing inequalities. A human security framework attentive to governance and institutional dynamics thus offers a more integrated and realistic understanding of insecurity than sector-specific analyses.

4. Governance, Institutions, and the Human Security Deficit

The persistence of non-traditional security threats in India, despite extensive policy frameworks and constitutional guarantees, points to a deeper governance problem rather than an absence of intent or resources. Human insecurity in this context is best understood not as policy failure in isolation, but as an institutional condition produced through fragmented authority, compliance-oriented administration, and misaligned accountability structures. Governance, in this sense, is not merely the backdrop against which human security unfolds; it is the primary mechanism through which insecurity is either mitigated or reproduced.

4.1 Policy Proliferation and the Illusion of Protection

India's policy landscape is characterized by an expanding array of welfare schemes, rights-based legislation, and sectoral missions aimed at improving human development outcomes. Yet, policy density has not translated into commensurate improvements in lived security. Governance scholars have long warned that policy proliferation without institutional coherence often creates the illusion of action while diffusing responsibility (Pritchett, Woolcock, & Andrews, 2013; Grindle, 2017).

From a human security perspective, this dynamic is particularly consequential. Fragmented policy design leads to uneven implementation across states and districts, producing a geography of insecurity that mirrors administrative capacity rather than need. Citizens experience this not as abstract governance failure but as delayed services, arbitrary exclusions, and unreliable institutional support. The result is a gradual erosion of trust in public systems, which itself constitutes a form of insecurity.

Analytical work on policy implementation in India highlights how compliance-driven monitoring systems privilege procedural adherence over substantive outcomes, weakening the protective function of the state (Sheokand, 2019). When governance success is measured through documentation rather than human impact, insecurity becomes normalized within routine administrative practice.

4.2 Administrative Culture, Leadership, and Institutional Ethics

Institutions mediate human security through everyday decisions made by administrators, educators, health workers, and local officials. The ethical orientation, leadership quality, and organizational climate within these institutions significantly influence whether policies are experienced as protective or punitive. Governance research increasingly emphasizes that institutional performance cannot be reduced to formal rules alone but is shaped by informal norms and professional value systems (March & Olsen, 1989; Rothstein, 2011).

In education and public service institutions, leadership practices play a critical role in shaping professional motivation and service quality. Hierarchical, target-driven leadership models often generate stress, disengagement, and risk-averse behavior, undermining institutional responsiveness to human needs. Conversely, value-driven leadership that emphasizes trust, autonomy, and ethical responsibility has been shown to strengthen both professional well-being and citizen outcomes.

Empirical studies examining leadership and organizational climate in Indian educational institutions demonstrate how leadership styles indirectly influence human security by shaping teachers' job satisfaction, institutional trust, and commitment to student development (Sheokand, 2024). These findings suggest that human security deficits cannot be addressed solely through external policy reform but require internal institutional transformation.

4.3 Professional Well-Being as a Hidden Security Variable

One of the most under-theorized dimensions of human security is the well-being of frontline professionals responsible for policy delivery. Teachers, healthcare workers, and social service personnel operate at the interface between the state and citizens. When these professionals experience chronic stress, role overload, and moral dissonance, the protective capacity of institutions is significantly weakened.

Public administration literature has increasingly recognized that professional well-being is not a peripheral concern but a determinant of institutional effectiveness (Van der Wal, 2017). In the Indian context, studies on occupational stress reveal how systemic pressures erode professional resilience and compromise service quality, particularly in education and social sectors.

Research analyzing occupational well-being among teachers illustrates how persistent stress, inadequate institutional support, and misaligned accountability mechanisms diminish both professional performance and student outcomes (Sheokand, 2025). From a human security standpoint, this constitutes a structural vulnerability: when the guardians of human development are themselves insecure, institutional protection becomes fragile and uneven.

4.4 Governance, Trust, and the Reproduction of Insecurity

Trust functions as a critical intermediary between governance systems and human security outcomes. Institutional trust enables compliance, cooperation, and resilience, while its absence amplifies vulnerability and social fragmentation. Political theorists argue that trust is not an attitudinal variable alone but an institutional achievement produced through fairness, transparency, and ethical governance (Levi, 1998; Rothstein & Teorell, 2008).

In India, declining trust in public institutions is often linked to inconsistent service delivery, perceived arbitrariness, and weak grievance redressal mechanisms. These governance deficits disproportionately affect marginalized populations, for whom institutional failure translates directly into insecurity. The absence of trust also undermines the effectiveness of technological and policy innovations, as citizens remain reluctant to engage with systems they perceive as opaque or punitive.

Human security, therefore, cannot be sustained in the absence of institutional trust. Governance arrangements that prioritize control over care, metrics over meaning, and efficiency over ethics risk deepening insecurity even as they expand administrative reach.

4.5 Technology, Administrative Power, and Ethical Risk

The growing reliance on digital governance tools and data-driven decision-making introduces new governance challenges for human security. While technology enhances state capacity, it also redistributes administrative power in ways that may weaken accountability and human judgment. Scholars of public sector ethics caution that algorithmic governance can entrench bias and exclusion when deployed without normative oversight (Mittelstadt et al., 2016).

In the Indian governance context, digital systems increasingly shape access to welfare, education, and health services. Without robust ethical frameworks and institutional safeguards, these systems risk transforming administrative inefficiency into automated exclusion. Analytical work on AI and governance underscores the need for human-centric design principles to ensure that technological capacity strengthens rather than undermines human security (Sheokand, 2025).

Section Synthesis

This section demonstrates that India's human security challenges are not simply policy gaps but governance outcomes rooted in institutional design, leadership norms, professional well-being, and ethical orientation. Non-traditional threats persist because governance systems frequently prioritize procedural control over human-centered protection. Addressing human insecurity, therefore, requires institutional reform that aligns administrative capacity with ethical responsibility, professional dignity, and public trust.

5. Social Vulnerability, Gender, and the Uneven Distribution of Human Insecurity

Human insecurity in India is not experienced uniformly; it is structured along lines of gender, class, caste, region, and occupational status. A human security framework that neglects these asymmetries risks abstracting insecurity away from lived realities. Social vulnerability, in this sense, is not merely a demographic condition but the cumulative outcome of institutional arrangements, social norms, and policy priorities that differentially expose groups to risk.

5.1 Gender as a Structural Axis of Human Insecurity

Gender constitutes one of the most persistent and cross-cutting dimensions of human insecurity. Women's exposure to economic precarity, unpaid care burdens, workplace exploitation, and violence reflects deeply embedded inequalities that transcend sectoral boundaries. Feminist security scholars argue that traditional security paradigms systematically marginalize these experiences by privileging public threats over private harm, thereby rendering everyday insecurity invisible (Tickner, 1995; True, 2012).

In India, gendered insecurity manifests through multiple, overlapping domains. Labour market participation remains segmented and informalized, with women disproportionately concentrated in low-paid, insecure employment. Legal protections, while formally robust, are unevenly enforced, leaving substantial gaps between rights on paper and safety in practice. This disjunction underscores the limits of legalistic approaches to human security in the absence of institutional accountability and cultural change.

Empirical analyses of women's work and vulnerability in India demonstrate how policy frameworks often fail to address structural disadvantages embedded within labour markets and social institutions (Sheokand,

2018). From a human security perspective, gendered insecurity reflects not individual vulnerability but systemic failure to translate formal equality into substantive protection.

5.2 Violence, Safety, and Bodily Integrity

Personal security, encompassing freedom from violence and fear, lies at the core of the human security framework. Yet, violence against women and marginalized groups remains a persistent feature of social life in India. Scholars note that such violence is not merely criminal but institutional, sustained through weak enforcement, social normalization, and administrative inertia (Farmer, 2004).

The persistence of gender-based violence highlights a critical governance paradox: the coexistence of legal reform with institutional apathy. When reporting mechanisms are inaccessible or unresponsive, and when justice systems are slow or uneven, insecurity becomes routinized. Research examining crime against women in India underscores how institutional failures and societal attitudes interact to undermine women's safety and dignity (Sheokand, 2017b).

Within a human security framework, bodily integrity is not a peripheral concern but a foundational one. The inability of institutions to guarantee personal safety signals a profound breakdown in the protective function of the state.

5.3 Intersectionality and Compounded Vulnerability

Human insecurity intensifies at the intersections of gender, class, caste, and geography. Intersectional analyses reveal how individuals located at multiple axes of disadvantage face compounded risk, particularly in accessing education, health care, and secure employment (Crenshaw, 1991). In India, women from marginalized castes, migrant communities, and rural regions experience heightened exposure to insecurity due to both social exclusion and institutional neglect.

These compounded vulnerabilities challenge universalist policy designs that assume homogenous beneficiaries. When governance systems fail to recognize differentiated needs, they inadvertently reproduce inequality and insecurity. Human security analysis, therefore, demands sensitivity to social stratification and institutional bias.

5.4 Care Work, Social Reproduction, and Invisible Insecurity

A critical but often overlooked dimension of human security concerns social reproduction and unpaid care work. Feminist political economy highlights how the burden of care is disproportionately borne by women, shaping their access to education, employment, and public life (Folbre, 2001). In India, the invisibility of care work within policy frameworks contributes to economic and psychological insecurity for women across life stages.

Care-related insecurity became particularly visible during periods of crisis, when institutional support systems proved inadequate. From a governance perspective, the failure to recognize and redistribute care responsibilities reflects a narrow conception of productivity and security that undervalues human well-being.

Human security frameworks that incorporate care ethics broaden the analytical lens to include relational and emotional dimensions of security, reinforcing the need for governance models that acknowledge dependency, vulnerability, and interdependence as normal social conditions rather than exceptions.

5.5 Spatial Inequality and the Geography of Insecurity

Human insecurity is also spatially distributed. Urban informal settlements, remote rural regions, and conflict-affected areas experience heightened exposure to economic, health, and environmental risk. Spatial inequality intersects with institutional capacity, as regions with weaker administrative infrastructure struggle to deliver consistent protection.

Development scholars argue that spatial governance failures exacerbate vulnerability by concentrating risk in already disadvantaged communities (Scott, 1998). In India, uneven state capacity and decentralization outcomes produce distinct local security environments, challenging centralized policy solutions.

6. Conclusion: Human Security as India's Defining Governance Challenge

This paper has argued that human security in 21st-century India cannot be understood through the lens of episodic crises, sectoral deficiencies, or resource constraints alone. Rather, non-traditional security threats in India are structurally produced and institutionally sustained. Economic precarity, health system fragility, educational stress, gendered vulnerability, and environmental risk are not isolated phenomena; they are mutually reinforcing outcomes of governance arrangements that privilege procedural compliance, administrative expansion, and technological control over human-centered protection.

By reframing human security as a governance outcome rather than a residual byproduct of development, the analysis moves beyond the conventional binaries that dominate security and policy discourse. The central finding is not that India lacks policy ambition or institutional reach, but that the translation of policy into protection is systematically weakened by fragmented authority, misaligned accountability, declining institutional trust, and the erosion of professional well-being within frontline institutions. Human insecurity, in this sense, is produced less by the absence of the state than by the manner in which state power is exercised.

Three broader implications emerge from this analysis.

First, human security demands an institutional, not merely programmatic, response. Expanding welfare schemes, legal protections, or digital platforms will not, in themselves, generate security unless governance systems are capable of ethical judgment, contextual responsiveness, and trust-building. Institutional climate, leadership practices, and professional value orientations must be treated as core components of security architecture rather than internal administrative concerns.

Second, the uneven distribution of human insecurity underscores the limits of universalist policy designs. Gender, class, caste, occupation, and geography shape exposure to risk in ways that standardized governance responses routinely fail to capture. Human security frameworks that ignore intersectionality risk reproducing the very vulnerabilities they seek to address. A shift toward differentiated, context-sensitive governance is therefore essential for translating formal inclusion into substantive protection.

Third, the expanding role of digital governance and artificial intelligence presents a decisive test for the future of human security. Technology has enhanced state capacity, but it has also introduced new forms of opacity, exclusion, and surveillance. Without ethical safeguards, participatory oversight, and respect for professional judgment, technological governance risks hardening insecurity into automated routine. The

challenge is not to resist technological change, but to subordinate it to human-centric values and institutional accountability.

Taken together, these insights suggest that human security must be repositioned as a foundational measure of democratic quality. In large, diverse democracies such as India, the legitimacy of the state increasingly rests not on its ability to control territory or manage populations, but on its capacity to protect dignity, agency, and well-being in everyday institutional encounters. Human security, therefore, is not an alternative to national security; it is its moral and practical precondition.

By integrating human security theory with governance and institutional analysis, this paper contributes to security studies and public policy scholarship in three ways: it clarifies the structural nature of non-traditional threats, foregrounds the institutional determinants of insecurity, and offers a human-centric framework for evaluating governance performance in complex democratic settings. Future research would benefit from empirical testing of these relationships across sectors and states, as well as comparative analysis with other developing democracies navigating similar tensions between capacity, control, and care.

What ultimately emerges is a simple but demanding proposition: securing the state without securing the human is no security at all. For India, the challenge of human security is not peripheral to its development trajectory; it is the decisive governance test of the 21st century.

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