The Shadow of Empire: How British Colonialism Shaped Modern Attitudes Towards Transgender People In India

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The Shadow of Empire: How British Colonialism Shaped Modern Attitudes Towards Transgender People In India*†‡

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†Under the guidance of our faculty mentor, we determined that IRB approval was not necessary for the interviews discussed in this project. This is primarily due to the informal nature of the interviews as well as the minimal risk interview questions posed to participants. All interviewees whose names are mentioned in this report explicitly consented to being named.

‡Cover image credit: "Hardwar, India" by Edward Lear (1875). Cleveland Museum of Art.

Abstract

How did British colonialism shape views towards transgender people in India? In this report, we review the historical record on this question and add to it with an original quantitative analysis. We further contextualize the problem and its modern ramifications through interviews with community-based organizations and transgender people in India. Previous literature posits that British rule - through its promotion of Victorian gender norms and explicit criminalization of transgender identity - caused modern Indians to become more transphobic than their precolonial ancestors. However, while the literature is rich with descriptions of British efforts to stigmatize and marginalize transgender identity, the empirical evidence for this claim is minimal. This study presents, to our knowledge, the first attempt to empirically validate this claim. We examine variation in Indian politicians' stances on transgender issues across India's parliamentary constituencies (PCs) in the 17th Lok Sabha. We find that politicians from PCs with more exposure to direct British rule during the colonial era hold more transphobic stances than politicians from PCs with less direct exposure, after controlling for potential confounding variables. The difference is particularly strong in electorally competitive PCs. We cautiously interpret this as evidence that British colonialism durably increased transphobia in India, manifesting in opposition to the inclusion and acceptance of transgender Indians today. In addition to this analysis, we interview numerous local stakeholders regarding the modern implications of this history, and what can be done to reduce the discrimination faced by transgender people in various aspects of Indian society. We conclude with a set of recommendations for steps forward to address this issue, as well as open questions for future research.

Part I: Historical Background

"If it were not for British colonialism, India would be the most accepting country in the world today"

- Rose Venkatesan

1 Introduction

In the autobiography "The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story", A. Revathi (2010) describes her life as a transgender woman in modern India, detailing experiences of rejection, sexual assault, and discrimination. More than just being a personal narrative, her memoir offers a glimpse into the systemic transphobia[1] that creates daily struggles for transgender people across the country. The attitudes she encountered are not isolated to her story; they are echoed and quantified in nationwide surveys. For example, according to a 2016 study conducted by the Williams Institute at UCLA, India scored a 61/100 on the study's "Transgender Rights Score"—a lackluster figure substantially below most Western countries (Williams Institute 2016). In addition, more than half of Indian respondents agreed that transgender people are violating cultural traditions of India, and 57% agreed that transgender people have a form of mental illness. These attitudes manifest in pervasive discrimination, including harassment by police, bullying, and even abandonment by family members (Agoramoorthy and Hsu 2015).

To a Western observer, this may not seem strange. After all, the Global South often lags behind the West on development indicators. But a look at the history of gender identity in India reveals a more complex story. Far from being a new outpost for LGBTQ+ identities, India has been home to non-binary and transgender people for millennia. In precolonial times, transgender people were not only allowed to exist, but were included in the social framework of Indian society, filling religious and courtly roles throughout the subcontinent (Reddy 2005). Thus, the fact that modern-day Indians disapprove of deviations from the gender binary seems a puzzling anomaly.

So what changed? The majority of research cites British colonialism as the primary driver of transphobia and anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes' prevalence in Indian society. In the words of Peer (2016), on the topic of anti-gay attitudes, "it would appear that homophobia, not homosexuality, is the Western import into India." Indeed, certain Indian laws which discriminate against the transgender community were actually written by the British colonial government (Gupta 2008, Han and O'Mahoney 2018).

However, extant research on this topic suffers from two primary flaws. First, while legal analysis points to the lasting impact of British colonialism on the Indian legal system, it does not tell us anything about colonialism's role in specifically driving transphobic attitudes

[1] Throughout this report, we use "transphobia" as an umbrella term to mean anti-transgender attitudes and behaviors, as well as opposition to policies that would ensure equal rights and opportunities for transgender individuals

within society. Second, work illustrating the lasting effects of British efforts to stigmatize and criminalize deviations from the gender binary is not causally identified.

In this report, we seek to fill these gaps with an original empirical analysis measuring the impact of colonialism on modern-day attitudes. Our analysis reveals a statistically significant and negative effect of colonial rule on contemporary support for transgender rights. We supplement this analysis with an overview of the historical literature, highlighting the mechanisms through which the British poisoned public opinion regarding transgender acceptance. We also include a discussion of the modern implications of this history, focusing on our July 2025 interviews with local stakeholders working to promote transgender inclusivity in India today. We end with a set of recommendations and directions for future research on this important topic.

2 Historical Background

In order to understand contemporary transphobia and attitudes towards transgender people in India we must first grapple with the country's colonial past. While many South Asian cultures prior to colonization recognized and accommodated gender nonconformity to some extent through social roles, colonial rule radically altered these structures. In the Indian subcontinent, British colonists introduced a racialized and moralized understanding of gender and sexuality that pathologized gender nonconforming bodies and behaviors, transforming what was once seen as socially embedded identities into legal and moral deviance. Through this literature review we synthesize work from history, gender studies, and political science to trace how colonial rule – through its legal infrastructure and ideological frameworks – transformed perceptions of gender in India, leaving a legacy that continues to shape attitudes toward transgender people today.

2.1 Colonial Rule and the Criminalization of Hijras

Before the arrival of British colonists to the Indian subcontinent, India featured a diverse set of gender norms that resisted Western perceptions of the gender binary. Among the most prominent examples are the hijras, a community of gender nonconforming people whose histories have been documented in religious texts, temple rituals, and courtly life across precolonial India (Hinchy, 2019). Hijras are individuals assigned male at birth who adopt feminine gender expression or identity and hold important religious, social, and political roles throughout pre-colonial India (Vanita & Kidwai, 2000). Hijras can be found in ancient Hindu texts like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, were featured in the Mughal court culture, and played ceremonial roles like bestowing fertility blessings at weddings and births (Vanita & Kidwai, 2000). Their presence across religious and regional traditions suggests a precolonial framework that accommodated gender nonconformity not as a deviance but as a part of a spiritual and social order that was broadly accepted by ancient Indian society.

Hijra's clear existence in precolonial society complicates many modern assumptions about the universality of binary gender norms typically held by many in the West. While we cannot claim that hijras were universally celebrated or free from stigma, their institutionalized roles point to a form of conditional acceptance that was culturally apparent within South Asian

conceptions of gender and sexuality (Reddy, 2005). In contrast to many Western concepts of queerness as being marginal or subversive, the hijra identity was historically incorporated into state and spiritual life, however, it was done so in hierarchical ways (Reddy, 2005). This stands in stark contrast to the Victorian British worldview that would soon govern the subcontinent.

The onset of British rule marked a dramatic shift in the status and public perception of gender nonconforming people. However, before diving into the legal interventions of the colonial period, it is important to clarify the distinction between "eunuchs", "hijras", and other transgender or nonbinary groups in South Asia. The term "eunuchs" historically referred to individuals (typically assigned male at birth) who were castrated, sometimes for roles in royal courts, particularly in the Mughal period (Reddy, 2005). While some "eunuchs" became part of the hijra community, the two are not synonymous. The hijra identity encompasses a broader socio-religious category that includes transgender women, intersex individuals, and others whose gender identity falls outside of the male/female binary (Hinchy, 2019). By contrast, "transgender" and "nonbinary" are more contemporary umbrella terms that encompass a wide range of gender identities, including but not limited to hijras, and may or may not map neatly onto precolonial Indian classifications (Khan, 2001). There are also regional terms, such as "aravani" and "thirunangai", which have been used in different parts of India to refer to specific groups of transgender people.

This clarification is important because British colonial laws – such as those described in the Criminal Tribes Act – explicitly targeted "eunuchs" in legal language, but in practice applied these restrictions to hijra communities (Hinchy, 2019). Recognizing these distinctions helps to more accurately trace the mechanisms by which colonial legal frameworks and other cultural impositions had in reshaping perceptions of gender diversity in India.

British colonists imbued Western values, particularly Victorian and Christian moral frameworks, onto the indigenous people, labeling hijras in particular as sexually deviant and socially dangerous. This moral panic surrounding a people they did not understand led to legal and administrative oppression, with hijras becoming the targets of systemic surveillance and repression. As Jessica Hinchy (2019) shows, colonial officials viewed hijras not as spiritual or social leaders, but as embodiments of sexual and moral degeneracy. This reframing was not incidental. It was part of a broader colonial project to impose a Victorian Christian moral worldview on Indian society, what Ann Stoler (2002) defined as the 'governance of intimacy'. Through census classifications, public health inspections, and law enforcement, the British colonial state sought to make the indigenous gender categories of India into pathologized identities that warranted criminalization.

The clearest manifestation of this shift was the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) of 1871. While the act ostensibly targeted communities considered by the British to be hereditary criminals, a special clause was added to classify hijras specifically as a criminal tribe in several provinces across India. The language used in official documents described them as "habitual sodomites," "emasculated men", and "corruptors of youth" (Hinchy, 2019). They were prohibited from wearing female clothing, performing in public, or adopting children – activities that were central to their social identity and survival (Hinchy, 2019). These laws imposed a new regime of surveillance, in which the gender-nonconforming body was not just policed but criminalized as inherently dangerous. Importantly, the CTA created bureaucratic tools for tracking hijras – tools that would have long afterlives. This colonial

classification was not limited to gender variance. Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), enacted in 1860, criminalized "carnal intercourse against the order of nature," a provision drawn directly from British sodomy laws. While Section 377 did not explicitly reference gender identity, it became a legal instrument used to harass and punish queer and gender-nonconforming individuals broadly (Gupta, 2008; Han & O'Mahoney, 2018). As scholars like Narrain (2004) and Gupta (2008) argue, Section 377 institutionalized heteronormative morality under the guise of secular criminal law. Gupta (2008) notes that Section 377 was disproportionately used to harass sex workers and hijras, often under the guise of public decency and moral hygiene, perpetuating the colonial logic of social control.

Crucially, as Goodman (2001) argues, laws like Section 377 operated beyond their formal enforcement; they functioned as tools of social panopticism, creating a climate in which individuals internalized legal norms and policed themselves and others accordingly. In doing so, it reinforced the binary logic of sex and gender while introducing legal barriers to expression, association, and movement for queer Indians.

Together, the CTA and IPC exemplified the ways British colonialism legally encoded moralized understandings of gender and sexuality. These laws were not neutral regulations; they were ideological tools designed to remake Indian society in the image of Victorian Britain. Their legacy illustrates what Stoler (2002) describes as the "intimate" dimensions of empire, where colonial governance reached into the body, the home, and the affective life of its subjects. Through legal exclusion, symbolic demonization, and bureaucratic enumeration, the British constructed hijras and other gender-nonconforming individuals as threats to both public morality and the colonial state itself.

Moreover, the effects of these colonial policies did not disappear with Indian independence. As Reddy (2005) and Hinchy (2019) note, the postcolonial Indian state inherited many of the legal and cultural frameworks set in motion by British rule. Surveillance of hijras continued, Section 377 remained on the books until 2018, and societal stigma was normalized through the institutionalization of colonial-era moral panics. Following the logic from Goodman (2001), these legal and bureaucratic categories likely bled into social attitudes, state practices, and even human rights discourses in contemporary India.

2.2 Measuring Colonial Legacies on Contemporary Outcomes

Measuring the causal effects of colonialism on contemporary outcomes poses a significant methodological challenge, marked by issues of endogeneity, measurement validity, and historical inference. Yet, the past two decades has seen a growing body of work that has developed new and innovative strategies to causally identify the long-term effects of colonial-era institutions, norms, and policies on present day outcomes. This section reviews some of the key approaches employed in this literature and considers how they might help to inform us of colonialism's influence on gender and sexuality in post-colonial India.

2.2.1 Leveraging variation in colonial rule

One of the most common strategies in studying the long-term causal impact of colonization is leveraging within-country variation in colonial rule (Iyer, 2010; Banerjee & Iyer, 2005). During the colonial era, the British governed India through two primary modes: direct

and indirect rule. Direct rule applied to territories that were directly under the control of the British Crown and its colonial bureaucracy (Iyer, 2010). These areas were governed by officials appointed by the British and the occupants of these territories were fully subjected to British laws, institutions, and economic systems (Banerjee & Iyer, 2005; Acemoglu, Johnson, & Robinson, 2001). The British directly controlled the design and legal enforcement of legal codes, property rights, and broader public administration (Iyer, 2010). Indirect rule applied to princely states, which were semi-autonomous regions ruled by Indian hereditary monarchs but were still under the citizenry of the British crown (Copland, 1997; Iyer, 2010). While these princely rulers maintained significant autonomy over domestic affairs, including taxation, property, and social regulation, they were still subject to treaties that ceded foreign affairs and certain military matters over to the British (Copland, 1997; Banerjee & Iyer, 2005). This arrangement allowed the British to rule over India much more cheaply by co-opting existing elite structures while still maintaining their imperial dominance over the subcontinent (Banerjee & Iyer, 2005; Acemoglu, Johnson, & Robinson, 2001).

The distinction between these systems of rule created sharp institutional variation within the boundaries of colonial India, which allows for causal analysis measuring the long-term effects of direct versus indirect rule. As a prominent example from economics, Iyer's (2010) exploitation of this variation compares those that fell under direct rule of the British versus those that were governed indirectly by princely rulers. The findings from that study show that regions that were directly ruled invested less in public goods (e.g. education and health) than indirectly ruled regions, a gap that still persists into the modern era. The explanation behind this variation lies in the incentives of British administrators who prioritized extractive revenue policies over local welfare, particularly in comparison to the princely rulers who were more embedded in local society and were more likely to be responsive to their subjects.

Utilizing variation such as direct versus indirect rule is valuable for measuring colonial legacies because the princely state boundaries were drawn in ways that were largely exogenous to later development outcomes, creating a type of 'natural experiment'. Scholars have used these differences to study how institutional exposure under colonial rule shaped long term trajectories of economic development, inequality, and democratic quality (Banerjee and Iyer, 2005; Iyer, 2010).

In the context of gender and sexuality, the distinction between direct and indirect rule can be particularly useful. Regions that were directly ruled were more likely to be uniformly subjected to British legal codes, including the Indian Penal Code of 1860 (with Section 377) and the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) of 1871, which explicitly targeted hijras as a criminal tribe (Hinchy, 2019). Princely states, while certainly influenced by British norms, retained more leeway to preserve local norms, which may have moderated the intensity of colonial rule on gender policing (Hinchy, 2019). This variation in rule may have also produced regional variation in stigma towards transgender or gender nonconforming people, a variation that can potentially be measured and linked to contemporary attitudes.

2.2.2 Instrumental variables approach

Other approaches to studying historical legacies on contemporary people include utilizing instrumental variables to address the endogeneity of where colonial institutions are placed. Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson (2001) employed settler mortality rates as an instrument

for the nature of colonial institutions, arguing that low mortality rates encouraged more European settlement and increased the likelihood of inclusive institutions, while high mortality rates encouraged more extractive regimes. Here they began with the observation that European colonizers instituted significant variation in the types of institutions they put in place across the territories that they controlled. In some, they created inclusive institutions that protected property rights and encouraged investment in local communities, while in others, they imposed extractive institutions designed to take advantage of resources for the benefit of the crown.

The central challenge here is that the type of institutions established were not randomly assigned, meaning that colonizers may have picked certain regions to have more inclusive systems because they were already more prosperous or politically stable, making it difficult to assess causal claims. To address this, Acemogulu et al., exploited settler mortality rates during the colonial period as an instrumental variable for institution type. The logic here is that in colonies where Europeans experienced low mortality rates (often due to more temperate climates and reduced risk of disease), they settled in larger numbers and replicated European-style institutions thereby having greater property rights and more inclusive systems. By contrast, regions with high settler mortality rates (due to malaria, yellow fever, and other diseases), established smaller administrative outposts and more extractive systems, relying more on forced labor and coercion rather than inclusive government.

While Acemoglu et al.'s analysis focuses on economic outcomes, the core logic of their design translates directly to studies of colonialism's cultural and social effects on the modern era. In the Indian context, one could imagine a similar argument: regions where the British invested more heavily in long-term colonies (due to favorable conditions for settlement) may have experienced deeper entrenchment of Victorian moral codes, including norms around gender and sexuality. Conversely, areas with more limited British settlement might have retained greater continuity with precolonial attitudes towards gender and sexuality.

2.2.3 Other methods

Physical proximity to colonial infrastructure offers an additional method of measuring colonial exposure. One such study looks at the effects of early 20th century colonial medical campaigns in Central Africa to predict trust in state health systems today (Lowes et al., 2017). This work links historical interventions to contemporary behavioral outcomes by leveraging proximity to physical colonial structures. The results showed that communities closer to the colonial medical posts were significantly less likely to trust modern medicine, less likely to use formal health services when sick, and more likely to rely on traditional healers. The mechanism, they argue, lies in the cultural memory of coercion of the colonial state. A collective historical experience was transmitted intergenerationally and has shaped behaviors long after the original actors have passed away.

Other studies have also found evidence for the intergenerational transmission of social norms and political attitudes. Nunn and Wantchekon (2011) used geocoded slave trade data to show that African regions with higher historical slave exports exhibit lower levels of interpersonal trust today. Similarly, Blaydes and Chaney (2013) trace differences in political trajectories among Christian and Muslim majorities in Europe and the Middle East to changes in institutions during the medieval period. More recent work from political science

and economics has found that norms, attitudes, and institutions can persist across decades (Homola et al. 2020), centuries (Acharya et al. 2016), and even millennia (Alesina et al 2013; Dincecco et al. 2024; Damann et al. 2023). Such persistence often operates through intergenerational transmission, where family socialization and community norms reproduce historical attitudes over time.

A smaller but growing body of work connects colonialism directly to the contemporary politics of gender and sexuality. Gupta (2008) documents how anti-sodomoy laws in numerous postcolonial states derive directly from British colonial legal codes, framing them as an "alien legacy" imposed upon indigenous sexualities. Han and O'Mahoney (2014) use a cross-national design to show that former British colonies are more likely to retain laws criminalizing homosexuality, even when controlling for religion, region, and other confounders. Beyond legal codes, Ananyev and Poyker (2021) and Denton-Schneider (2025) provide evidence that colonial histories in Africa continue to shape public opinion toward LGBTQ+ people into the present day. These findings resonate with research on how colonial states used laws to regulate sexuality as part of a broader campaign to control indigenous populations (Corntassel and Holder 2008). However, these works also reveal a larger empirical gap: the specific evaluation of colonial values on attitudes towards transgender people in India remain largely untested.

2.3 Summary of Existing Literature

British colonialism in India produced a complicated legal and cultural framework for regulating gender and sexuality, from the codification of Section 377 of the Indian Penal code to the explicit criminalization of hijras under the CTA of 1871. While prior work links British colonialism to contemporary anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes and laws in the former empire (Han and O'Mahoney 2014; Gupta 2008), no study to our knowledge causally examines whether these legacies persist in shaping contemporary Indian attitudes towards transgender people. Given the extensive evidence that colonial structures have directly influenced outcomes in areas ranging from public goods provisions (Iyer 2010) to inequality and political engagement (Banerjee and Iyer 2005) to mistrust in medical institutions (Lowes et al., 2017), it is reasonable to think that similar mechanisms operate in the domain of gender identity. And given the evidence of intergenerational transmission of social norms in myriad other contexts (e.g. Damann et al. 2023, Homola et al. 2020, Alesina et al. 2013), it seems reasonable that this mechanism would be at play in our context as well.

Building on the methodological strategies from the colonial legacies literature (Acemoglu et al. 2001; Nunn 2020; Lowes et al. 2017), this project links district-level variation in British rule to the colonial repression of hijras on contemporary attitudes towards transgenderpeople in India. By doing so, this project extends the scope of historical legacies research from political and economic outcomes (Iyer 2010; Banerjee and Iyer 2005) to the realm of gender and sexuality politics, contributing new causal evidence to debates on how deep historical legacies shape postcolonial social norms.

Part II: Empirical Analysis

3 Hypotheses

Our main hypothesis – derived from the historical literature – is that British colonialism durably increased transphobia in India. If this is the case, and if the mechanism is – as argued by the literature – the marginalization and criminalization of transgender identities during the colonial era, the observable implication of this hypothesis is that parts of India which were directly ruled during the colonial era should be, on average, more transphobic today than parts of India which were indirectly ruled through princely states.

In line with Goodman's (2001) argument, areas with more exposure to British moral and legal stigmatization of transgender people during the colonial era should have experienced more societal internalization of anti-transgender norms. Since directly-ruled parts of India were more often subjected to these factors, this line of thinking leads us to believe that attitudes towards transgender people should be more negative, and support for transgender rights should be weaker, in parts of India that experienced direct colonial rule.

However, this is not a forgone conclusion, and there are a number of reasons to doubt the existence of such persistent effects. First, over 150 years have passed since the CTA and Section 377 were first enacted, and one might expect effects to decay or disappear entirely over such a long time period. Second, it is important to note that even before its full repeal, the application of Section 377 was uneven and often used selectively (Narrain and Bhan, 2005). Likewise, the enforcement of the CTA often came down to the individual proclivities of British magistrates. This means the application of these laws was far from uniform even in directly-ruled areas, which should bias against finding a significant effect (Hinchy 2019).

Thus, to shed light on this question, we present what is – to our knowledge – the first attempt at causally identifying the effect of British colonialism on contemporary transphobia in India. This section of the report discusses our methodology and the results from our analysis.

4 Methods

Testing our hypothesis necessitates operationalizing exposure to British colonialism as the independent variable and contemporary transphobia as the dependent variable.

To test our hypotheses, we employ a subnational comparison of different areas of India, comparing areas which were more directly exposed to British colonialism to areas which were less exposed. As noted previously in this report, such an approach is sometimes fraught with endogeneity issues, because decisions about where to rule directly versus indirectly often happen in a non-random manner. But this is only problematic if the dependent variable – or another confounder closely associated with the dependent variable – influences the colonists' decisions over where to rule. In certain cases, this is highly plausible. For example, Iyer (2010) notes that the British first conquered areas with high agricultural productivity, so finding that directly-ruled areas are more agriculturally productive than indirectly-ruled areas today would not be indicative of colonialism's effect. Similarly, if the British had chosen to conquer areas which were more transphobic, then finding that directly-ruled areas are more transphobic today would not be indicative of colonialism's effect either. However, we find it highly improbable that this was the case, as there is no historical evidence whatsoever

that local attitudes towards gender-nonconforming individuals influenced British colonists' decisions over where to rule. Thus, assignment of geographic units to direct or indirect rule can be assumed to be essentially random with respect to transphobia. This assumption allows a direct comparison of directly-ruled to indirectly-ruled parts of India to be a valid identification strategy for finding the causal effect of colonialism on contemporary transphobia.

Obtaining a dependent variable measuring subnational variation in transphobia across India is tricky, as – to our knowledge – no suitable public opinion data exists on this topic[2]. Thus, we use legislator scores as a proxy for public opinion. We obtain our legislator scores from Pink List India (2020), an organization which tracked statements made by politicians in the 17th Lok Sabha (Indian Parliament) and noted whether they are outspoken in support of (or against) transgender rights. Pink List India scores legislators on seven binary indicator variables, which we combine into an additive seven-point scale measuring support for transgender rights. Because each member of the Lok Sabha represents a different geographical unit known as a parliamentary constituency (PC), the legislator's score on this scale serves as a proxy for the level of public support for transgender rights in that PC. Figure 1 shows the PCs of India, shaded by legislator score[3].

One potential issue with this proxy is that politicians are largely free to say whatever they want on transgender issues. There is no requirement that legislators mirror the public opinion of their constituents, but there are electoral incentives to do so. Thus, we expect the proxy to function much better in electorally competitive PCs – where politicians' statements must hew much more closely to popular opinion – than in safely-held PCs where a politician may go unpunished for an unpopular statement. The observable implication here is that – if our hypothesis is correct – we should see no significant relationship between exposure to British colonialism and support for transgender rights in the full sample of PCs, but we should see a significant and negative relationship when we restrict the sample to only electorally competitive PCs.

To measure exposure to British colonialism at the PC level, we calculate the percent of land area of each PC that was directly versus indirectly ruled by the British at the time of Indian independence, using an overlay of colonial and modern maps (DataMeet Trust, n.d., Neonhydroxide, n.d.). Figure 2 shows a map of Indian PCs shaded by percent of land area that fell under direct rule[4].

[2]There have been some impressive data collection efforts on transphobia in India, but none are useable for our purposes. For example, IPSOS – in collaboration with Buzzfeed and the UCLA Williams Institute – fielded a global survey on transgender attitudes in 2016 which included India, but which featured only limited geographic coverage within the country (BuzzFeed News 2016). IPSOS fielded a similar survey in 2018, but acknowledged that their sample was not representative of the general population in India (Ipsos Public Affairs 2018). Aside from these surveys, none of our interviewees in India were aware of any existing data source that collected individual-level data on transphobia across different parts of India

[3]There were some PCs in which the name of the legislator from the Pink List India data did not match the name of the legislator from the Ashoka University database – the other main data sets used in this analysis. These PCs were dropped from the analysis and appear blank in Figure 1.

[4]Some PCs did not cleanly fit the directly- versus indirectly-ruled binary. For example, some provinces in India were considered "frontier" provinces, which had special administrative statuses under the British, and others were ruled by different European powers such as the French or Portuguese. These provinces are grayed out in Figure 2.

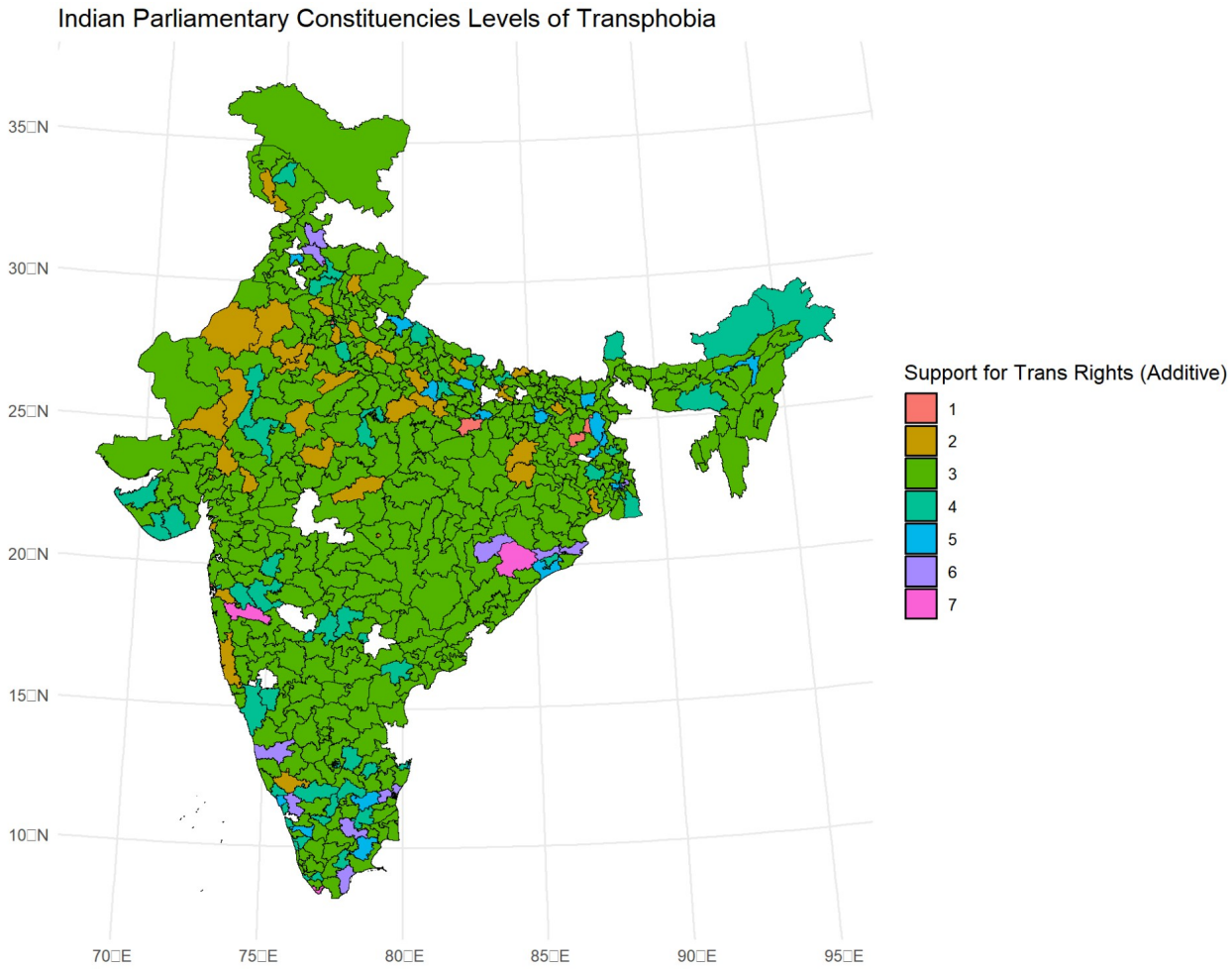

Figure 1: Parliamentary Constituencies of India, Shaded by MP Support for Trans Rights

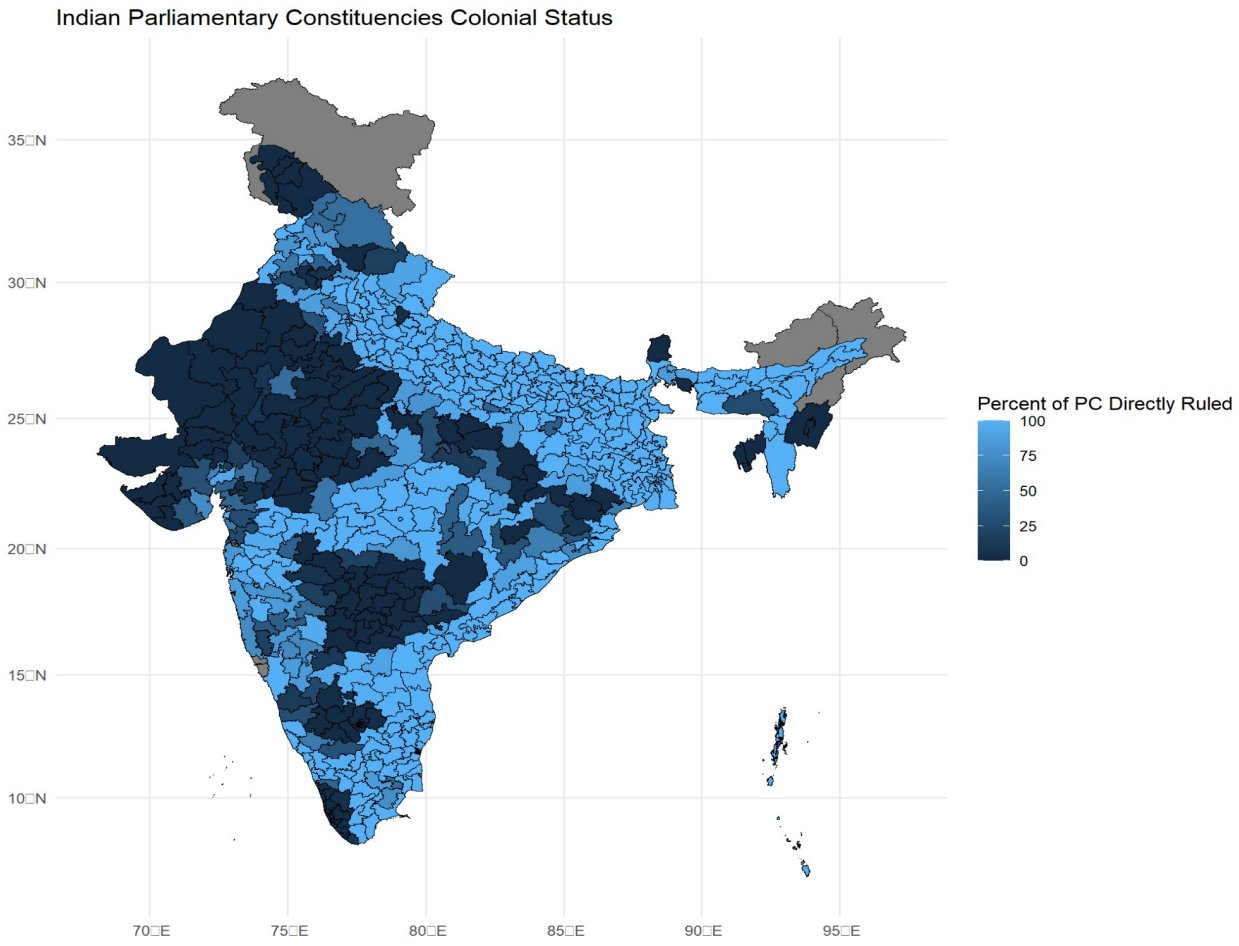

Figure 2: Parliamentary Constituencies of India, Shaded by Colonial Status

We analyze the data using regression analysis, with the additive measure of support for transgender rights as the outcome variable and percent of the PC that fell under direct rule as the main explanatory variable. To account for potential confounding variables, we control for legislator characteristics (occupation, sex, incumbency status, education level, and party affiliation), constituency characteristics (i.e., whether the PC is a Scheduled Tribe or Scheduled Caste seat), and population density. All controls were obtained from Ashoka University's Lok Dhaba database, which contains demographic information about all Lok Sabha members as well as information about the electoral contests which brought them to power (Agarwal et al., 2021a, Agarwal et al., 2021b).

5 Results

5.1 Regression Analysis

The results from the regression analysis support the hypothesis that direct rule by the British is associated with less support for transgender rights.

As expected, the effect is conditional on the competitiveness of the PC (i.e. the quality of the proxy). When all PCs are examined together, the effect is statistically indistinguishable from zero. However, as we restrict the sample to more and more electorally competitive PCs (using margin of victory thresholds of 5%, 2%, and 1%, shown in Figure 3, we see that the effect of British colonialism enlarges, becoming both statistically and substantively significant. Restricting the sample to only PCs where the election was decided by 1% or less, the effect of a PC switching from indirect to direct British rule (a value of 0 on the "Direct Rule" variable to a value of 100) decreases the MP's support for trans rights by a whole point on the seven-point "Support for Trans Rights" scale.

This finding mirrors a pattern in political science where politician behavior is attributed more to the characteristics of the individual politicians when elections are not competitive, and more to the characteristics of the population the politician represents when elections are competitive (Eifert, Miguel, and Posner, 2010).

This phenomenon is shown especially starkly in Figure 4, which plots the value of the coefficient of the Direct Rule variable as the exclusion criteria for PC competitiveness become increasingly restrictive. When we exclude all but the most competitive PCs from the regression, the effect of direct British rule is large and negative, but it becomes indistinguishable from zero as more noncompetitive districts are added in and the quality of the proxy declines. The clarity of the trend increases our confidence that the results shown in Figure 3 were not just the product of chance.

Aside from shedding light on our research question, the results also provide insight into other variables that are correlated with transphobia. Across all models, education is positively correlated with support for trans rights, although it is only significant in Model 1. Population density of the PC has a similar association – positive and significant in some models as well. Sex is a curious variable. Models 1-3 indicate that female MPs are more supportive of trans rights than male MPs (significantly so in Models 1 and 3), but Model 4 indicates exactly the opposite – that male MPs are more supportive than female MPs. We interpret the coefficient in Model 4 as likely the result of a fluke in the data due to small

sample size, and interpret the balance of the evidence as suggestive that female legislators are more supportive of trans rights than their male counterparts.

To save space, we do not present all variables included in the regressions in Figure 3, although the full regression table with all variables displayed is attached in the appendix. The only notable finding involving other variables is the significant difference between India's two major political parties – the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Indian National Congress (INC) – on support for trans rights. In Model 1, INC politicians are much more supportive of trans rights than BJP politicians, although the difference becomes insignificant in more restrictive models.

Comparison of Regression Results using Different Margin of Victory Thresholds

	Dependent variable:			
	Support for Trans Rights (Additive)			
	All PCs	Threshold 5%	Threshold 2%	Threshold 1%
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Direct Rule	-0.0001	-0.003	-0.006*	-0.010**
	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.004)
Sex	-0.259**	-0.269	-0.774*	1.845*
	(0.100)	(0.217)	(0.433)	(0.746)
Education	0.035*	0.039	0.090	0.061
	(0.019)	(0.041)	(0.080)	(0.062)
Population Density	0.00002**	0.0002**	0.0002	0.0001
	(0.00001)	(0.0001)	(0.0002)	(0.0002)
Constant	2.587***	3.819***	3.469**	2.191
	(0.738)	(1.089)	(1.611)	(1.333)
Other Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	503	88	42	24
R^2	0.158	0.268	0.564	0.893
Adjusted R^2	0.116	0.005	0.105	0.383
Residual Std. Error	0.769 (df = 478)	0.639 (df = 64)	0.654 (df = 20)	0.299 (df = 4)
F Statistic	3.739*** (df = 24; 478)	1.017 (df = 23; 64)	1.230 (df = 21; 20)	1.751 (df = 19; 4)
Note:				*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Figure 3: Main Regression Table

5.2 Robustness and Takeaways

Our results are robust to alternative specifications of the dependent variable and do not appear to be driven by unaccounted–for factors such as geography. These robustness checks are detailed in the appendix. Due to the ease with which our findings fit with our theoretical expectations and the robustness of our results to alternative explanations, we feel reasonably confident that the literature's claim regarding British colonialism's role in generating transphobia in India is correct.

If the British were responsible for generating transphobia in India, we would expect that people in areas of India that were directly ruled during the colonial era to be less supportive

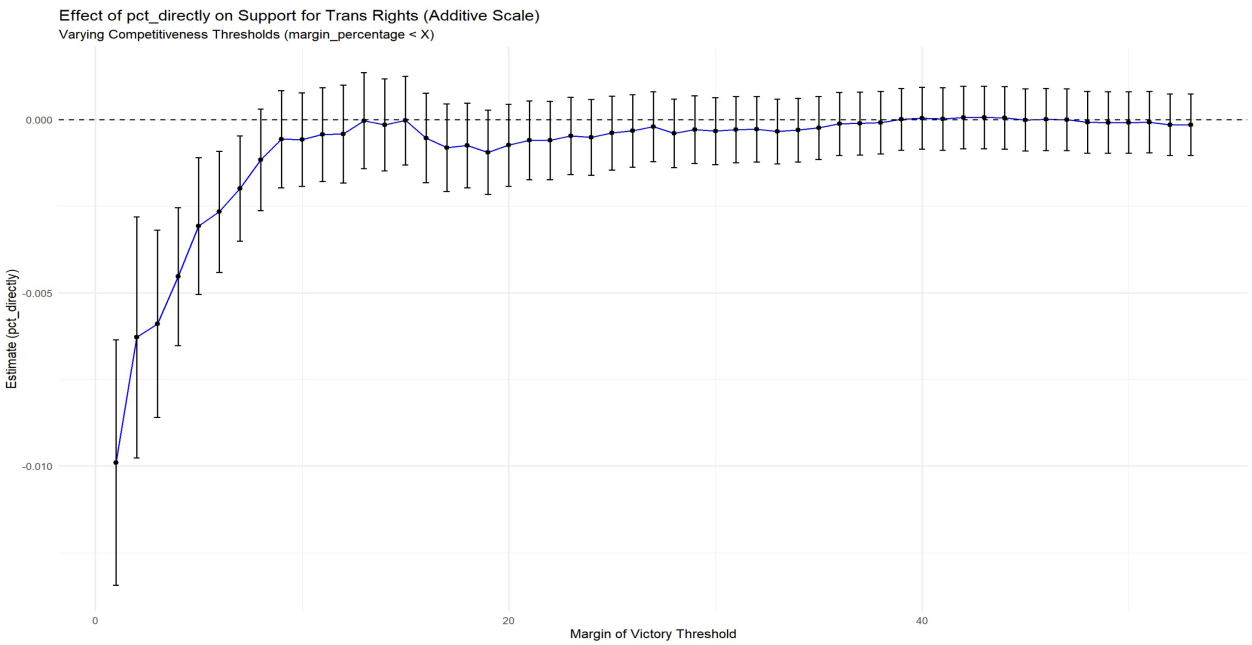

Figure 4: Effect of Direct Colonial Rule in PCs with Margin of Victory $< X\%$

of trans rights today than people living in areas of India that were indirectly ruled. In electorally competitive PCs, this would result in MPs from directly ruled areas being less supportive of trans rights than MPs from indirectly ruled areas. In non-competitive PCs, the effect of history is likely to be washed out by idiosyncrasies such as the demographic characteristics of the MP. This is exactly what we see in the data. This finding, in conjunction with the historical fact that the British actively suppressed nonbinary identities and sought to restrict the rights of transgender individuals in the parts of India they ruled, suggests that these British efforts were successful in durably increasing transphobia in India.

That said, we must consider these conclusions as tentative due to a number of limitations of this analysis, which are elaborated on in the next section.

5.3 Limitations

The clearest limitation of this paper is the reliance on legislator scores as a proxy for constituent public opinion. Aside from being a crude measure of transphobia within a PC, it results in a small sample size, which becomes concerningly low in our more restrictive models. There is also an issue of data quality. While Pink List India is – according to a conversation we had with local stakeholders – a reputable source, the imperfect match between politician names in their data and the Lok Dhaba dataset limits the sample size further.

Another limitation involves control variables. While we were able to control for a number of important variables in our regressions, there are others – such as religion, caste, and income – which remain unaccounted for. Ideally, one would control for the religious and caste makeup of a PC, as well as the PC's average income. However, this is difficult because the Indian government has not conducted a census since 2010, and – according to our conversations with an academic familiar with the Indian census – accessing existing data generally requires a

formal partnership or very deep relationship with the government.

Third, while we view endogeneity as an unlikely explanation for our results, we would like to include additional robustness checks to assuage the doubts of the skeptical reader. Most of all, we would like to complete an instrumental variable analysis using the Doctrine of Lapse – a quasi-random decision rule implemented by the British which, for a time, determined which parts of India would be directly versus indirectly ruled (Iyer 2010). Following the likes of Homola et al. (2020) and Lowes et al. (2017), we would also like to run analyses with different specifications of the independent variable, with distances from British administrative buildings (e.g churches, schools, police stations) as alternate measures of exposure to colonial rule. These tests would help pinpoint the precise mechanisms driving the inculcation of transphobia, as well as bolster the main findings. However, these analyses are challenging to execute using the available data. For example, there is no easy way to obtain a single measure of a legislator's physical distance from a specific building within their constituency. Furthermore, the proposed instrumental variable analysis would struggle with sample size, as there are only a small number of PCs in which the Doctrine of Lapse swayed control over the land. It would be more feasible if we had a measure of transphobia at a smaller unit of geography, such as a district rather than a PC, as this would help with sample size issues.

All of these limitations could be at least partially overcome by a single solution: a large, nationally representative survey of the Indian general public on attitudes towards transgender people. Such a survey would allow for aggregation at various levels of geography, freeing us from only analyzing data at the PC level. Because this survey would provide direct measures of transphobia, we would no longer need to use the legislator score proxy and thus would avoid all of the complications associated with that approach to the analysis. The robustness checks would be easier to accomplish with fine–grained individual–level data, and the survey could ask demographic questions directly. This would render it unnecessary to rely on Indian census data for demographic controls, thus allowing us to more easily control for confounding demographic variables such as religion or caste.

Such a survey does not currently exist, but we believe it would be a worthwhile data collection effort. Not only would it allow us to test our hypothesis in a more convincing manner, but it would allow for further testing of additional hypotheses and mechanism tests. For example, the survey could solicit more nuanced opinions on policies related to transgender people, probe knowledge about the community, and distinguish between feelings towards various transgender labels – e.g. "hijra", "transgender", "thirunangai", etc. Additionally, and perhaps of more value to policy practicioners and community-based organizations, it would highlight the places where transphobia is particularly pervasive in India. This would reveal places where interventions are most needed. Finally, from the standpoint of knowledge creation, a survey even with no specific objectives in mind could do a great deal in advancing our understanding of this form of prejudice in India today.

We are continuing to work on additional robustness checks using the current data, but without any fine-grained public opinion data the results will remain more tentative than conclusive. That said, we do find it noteworthy that even with highly imperfect data and numerous limitations plaguing our analysis, we still find evidence in support of our hypothesis. In our view, the addition of some quantitative evidence, however flawed, to the current literature on this topic is a useful step forward in our understanding of the lasting effect of British colonialism on transphobia in India.

Part III: Modern Implications

6 Discussion

Although India gained independence in 1947, the colonial structures that governed gender and sexuality did not simply disappear; rather they were reinterpreted and often reinforced by the postcolonial state. Legal structures introduced by the British government (particularly Section 377 of the Indian penal code, which criminalized "carnal intercourse against the order of nature") were instituted well into the 21st century (Han and O'Mahoney 2014). This allowed the postcolonial government to use tools from the colonial era to police non-normative sexualities and gender expressions. While the Delhi High Court struck down the statute in 2009 to decriminalize consesual gay sex, the decision was then overturned in 2013, only to finally be repealed by the supreme court in 2018 (Kidagoor, 2018). The turbulent legal history of Section 377 reflects the broader attitudes of the Indian state toward queer and gender non-conforming people.

Hijras, who have long existed as a recognized gender category on the Indian subcontinent, became particular targets of legal and social exclusion in the postcolonial era. Despite their historical position in religious, cultural, and even courtly life, hijras were increasingly cast as deviant and criminal under postcolonial regimes that inherited the colonial status quo on modernity and morality (Hossain 2012; Jaffrey 1996). These legacies persist into the present day in real material terms. Access to formal education and stable employment remains an issue for the hijra community, pushing many into sex work for their survival (Saria 2021). The structural barriers they face are not just legal but economic and social, intersecting with caste and class hierarchies that compound their marginalization (Saria 2021).

In recent years, the Indian government has taken symbolic steps towards recognizing gender diversity. Most notably, the landmark 2014 Supreme Court ruling formally recognized the "third gender" category in official government documents. While this recognition marked a significant cultural moment for Indians, its practical impact has been widely debated. Critics argue that the category's institutionalization has done little to address the systemic discrimination that hijras and other gender-nonconforming people face in their day-to-day lives (The Editorial Board, 2024). The recognition, while symbolically important, often operates within a narrow framework that fails to address broader questions of autonomy, access, and dignity (Tellis 2016).

Parallel to this has been the emergence of new trans rights movements that extend beyond the traditional hijra identity, advocating for healthcare access, legal autonomy, and educational inclusion (Reddy 2005). These movements, often led by younger trans people outside the guru-chela hijra kinship structures, emphasize bodily autonomy and individual rights, signaling a shift toward more liberal and rights-based discourses of gender. Yet this shift is not without tension. As Hossain (2012) and Pamment (2010) show, the negotiation between traditional cultural formations like hijras and emergent trans identities often produces friction within state policy and activist frameworks.

One of the most contested pieces of legislation in recent years has been the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act of 2019. While the act ostensibly aims to prohibit discrimination and provide welfare measures, it has been met with criticism from trans activists and legal scholars alike. The act requires individuals to submit to a bureaucratic process in order to be legally recognized as transgender, including a certificate from a district magis-

trate and proof of surgery for those seeking identification as male or female. This gatekeeping mechanism has been widely seen as a violation of bodily autonomy and an extension of the colonial logic of state surveillance over deviant bodies (Tellis 2012; Pink List India 2020). The mixed reception of the act (hailed by some as a step forward, decried by others as regressive) exemplifies the ongoing contestation over the terms of recognition and rights for trans and gender nonconforming people in India.

Taken together, these developments underscore that while legal and symbolic gains have been made, the deeper structures of marginalization rooted in colonial rule remain largely intact. The state's approach to gender nonconformity continues to reflect a tension between modern liberal frameworks and inherited colonial anxieties about deviance, control, and moral order. The recognition of hijras as a third gender and the repeal of Section 377 are important milestones, but they are insufficient for dismantling the social, legal, and economic hierarchies that continue to shape trans lives in India. As scholars like Narrain and Bhan (2005) and Saria (2021) emphasize, genuine inclusion will require more than legal reform, it will demand a reckoning with the colonial past and a restructuring of the normative frameworks that govern belonging in the present.

7 Interviews with Local Stakeholders

Our research team traveled to India in the summer of 2025 to meet with stakeholders and local community-based organizations (CBOs). Topics discussed included the history of transphobia in India, contemporary problems faced by the transgender community, and possible interventions to reduce transphobia. Our interview subjects included leadership at Sahodaran and Thozhi Shelter in Chennai, Sangama and an anonymous organization in Bengaluru, an anonymous organization in Mumbai; an independent activist; and several transgender women in Chennai who worked on the streets and were unaffiliated with any organization[5].

Throughout our discussions, a first principal theme was the confirmation of the claims from the literature. In line with our quantitative results, our interviewees generally believed that British colonialism had a negative and lasting impact on attitudes towards transgender people in India. Jaya at Sahodaran – an organization which supports gender and sexual minorities in Chennai – for example, agreed with the historical literature, and sent us additional sources bolstering this view of India's past.

However, this understanding of history – while shared by the educated and expert members of CBOs we talked to – is not universally held among the transgender community. During our interviews on the streets of Chennai, the interviewees shared their belief that India is more accepting today of transgender people than it was in the precolonial era. While they acknowledged that transgender people held a religious role in ancient Hindu society, they characterized these roles as circumscribed rather than integrated. They posited that transgender people have always been considered different in India, and that hardly anyone would have been willing to come out during the precolonial era. Instead, they stressed

[5]A number of our interviewees were unable to be reached after the interview or did not answer whether they would like to be named in this report. As such, these interviewees – and the organizations they were affiliated with – remain anonymous

that the West has been a positive influence on Indian attitudes, promoting acceptance and normalization, which they believed to be universal in the West. This understanding is reminiscent of the common misconception that LGBTQ+ identities are a Western import into colonized societies, the very misconception which Gupta (2008) and Peer (2016) claim to be false.

The second principal theme was the lived experiences of transgender people in India – particularly regarding discrimination and stigmatization by society. Our interviewees discussed stories of themselves or other transgender people being rejected and thrown out by their families. Even when parents are open-minded and willing to accept their trans children, many end up rejecting them anyway due to fears of how the rest of their family will be viewed. Aside from general stigma and family rejection, trans people face discrimination in various realms of life. Three key areas which were mentioned often were employment, housing, and education.

Landlords in cities like Chennai seem quite unwilling to rent to trans individuals, to such an extent that trans people must apply to dozens of apartments before even being considered. Educational discrimination is also a prevalent issue, with trans students being singled out, grouped separately from other kids, and made to feel isolated to such an extent that many drop out of school. Hiring is another major issue, as trans applicants struggle to secure employment, even for jobs for which they are unambiguously qualified. In both school and employment, several of our interviewees mentioned scapegoating, where they are blamed if anything goes wrong.

On the topic of employment, an interesting point was raised during our Chennai street interviews. The interviewees brought up the fact that it is easier for trans women to make a living in North India, where there is a stronger prescribed religious role for them in society. For example, many can find employment performing blessings or ritualistic dances at the opening of a shop. By contrast, shopkeepers in Chennai – where transgender people are seen more as outsiders – might only provide employment during festivals. Yet, despite this, these women did view the northern social climate as desirable. Rather than pining for a society that has a strong religious role set out for them, our interviewees stressed that they did not want any special treatment – they simply wanted "normal" jobs, such as cleaners and janitors for those that are uneducated, and office jobs for those that are educated. The religious role is a compromise that many trans women will accept, but – according to these interviewees – going back to a society where they are religiously revered but ultimately unequal is not an attractive solution.

Some of our interviewees noted that government interventions – both at the federal level and at the state level in Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka – have been helpful to some degree, but all stressed that these interventions do not go far enough. For example, our interviewees reported that Tamil Nadu recently passed a law to reserve seats for transgender students in schools and give out houses to transgender people, but the numbers of reserved seats and houses are vastly outnumbered by the number of eligible students and residents. Two of our anonymous interviewees discussed the complicated and evolving legacy of the 2019 Transgender Persons Act, which they said did bring in protections for transgender people but has been challenged by transgender activists for valid reasons.

Many of the government initiatives mentioned by our interviewees were recent, which gives the future an encouraging outlook. However, Manohar from Sangama – an LGBTQ+

rights group based in Bengaluru – cautioned against being too optimistic about future political progress, noting that parties in Karnataka have been making promises to gender and sexual minorities for 15 years now, yet this has not led to a massive shift in lived realities. Even if political change were to happen and more pro-transgender laws were implemented, it is unclear if de jure solutions would have anything more than minimal impact, as the main stumbling block for transgender acceptance and equality appears to be an issue of public opinion. Most people are simply misinformed about the transgender community and don't understand their struggles, making it very difficult to displace the negative attitudes most people hold towards their transgender peers. Interestingly though, and somewhat to our surprise, hate was not mentioned as a driving force behind these negative attitudes. Our interviewees generally chalked up the problem to misinformation, societal stigma, or a simple lack of understanding about transgender people.

The most promising path forward, then, appears to be education. As such, numerous Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), CBOs, and consulting groups across India have rolled out interventions aimed at educating the public about the transgender community, dispelling harmful myths, and promoting sensitization. For example, Sahodaran engages in sensitization of key community members, by inviting landlords, parents, and even street thugs to their drop-in centers in hopes of reducing their prejudice towards transgender people. PeriFerry – a consulting, skill-building, and advocacy foundation for transgender people – offers DEI workshops to corporations, educating employees about the trans community. Their training seeks to dismantle the "normal/abnormal" dichotomy and discuss how to tackle example scenarios that might arise in the workplace. Humsafar Trust – a large CBO with offices in multiple cities across India – also engages in sensitization with educators, lawyers, police, healthcare professionals, and family members of transgender people. In addition to the education of these important groups, Humsafar also provides education to transgender youth directly, through the operation of an online support platform. Clearly, education seems an appealing route towards prejudice reduction which many stakeholders have adopted.

As a whole, our conversations in India highlight a central opportunity: while legal reforms remain important, lasting progress for transgender inclusion in India will hinge on shifting public opinion. The relative absence of hate-driven hostility, along with the already active landscape of sensitization campaigns, suggest that well-designed educational interventions could be particularly impactful in dismantling stigma and correcting misinformation. Building on these insights, the final section of this report explores concrete ideas for future research and collaboration with CBOs – including an intervention that directly addresses the colonial roots of transphobia – as well as other strategies for public sensitization on this issue. We also consider potential drawbacks, experimental methodologies, and broader recommendations for CBOs, policymakers, and funders committed to advancing transgender equality in India.

8 Future Work

As a preliminary note, we recognize the limitations of our position as PhD students and relative newcomers to the study of transgender rights in India. While we do not assert the

authority to make strong claims for strategies for addressing transphobia, our research offers some insights that can inform potential interventions. Drawing on our findings and the social science literature more broadly, we outline a set of potential next steps that should be considered in collaboration with CBOs and the transgender community itself.

8.1 Proposed Interventions

Our study provides some early evidence that contemporary transphobia in India can be at least partially attributed to the legacy of British colonialism, which redefined gender categories and criminalized certain gender expressions. Given the extensive literature documenting the historical repression of transgender people by the British colonial state, we feel that a logical next step in this analysis is testing if calling attention to these colonial roots can help reduce prejudice towards transgender people. This framing would help counter the widespread belief that transgender rights are a "Western import" by highlighting gender diversity within India as part of their precolonial heritage.

One promising avenue is to test educational interventions that frame transphobia as an imported ideology from the colonial period, countering the prevailing belief that transgender acceptance as being a Western import. Such educational interventions could be delivered in multiple formats:

1. Community based sensitization programs for landlords, employers, and local officials (building off of Sahodaran and PeriFerry's work)

2. School-based curriculum integrating historical material on hijras and other gender nonconforming people in the precolonial era

3. Corporate diversity training modules adapted to include colonial history without inducing backlash

One limitation of existing work by CBOs is the lack of rigorous impact evaluation. While our interviewees at the CBOs we talked with noted that their sensitization exercises are often well-received, they acknowledged that they only conduct limited evaluations of efficacy. This gap presents an opportunity for experimental and quasi-experimental studies to identify which approaches are most effective. Additionally, prior work conducted by the CBOs have largely not directly used interventions that call attention to the colonial roots of transphobia. Thus, we believe that well-designed experimental studies, with a clear way of measuring impact, are a promising path forward. Such an endeavor could help clarify which existing interventions are effective at reducing prejudice, as well as explore whether additional interventions – such as the ones proposed above – are even more efficacious.

To rigorously evaluate the effectiveness of an intervention calling attention to the colonial roots of transphobia, we propose the following experimental and quasi-experimental studies to empirically test their impact.

Our first proposed study would directly target the workforce and would help us to evaluate whether adding colonial framing to diversity training improves inclusion outcomes in the workplace. This design would require us to partner with companies currently running inclusion workshops, such as PeriFerry. In this design we would randomly assign some of the workshops to include a 5-10 minute segment on the precolonial acceptance of hijras and the colonial-era legal repression, while the rest follow the standard training curriculum. Our main measurements of interest here would be measuring explicit attitudes towards transgen-

der people (e.g. comfort, fairness, and equality), behavioral intentions (e.g. willingness to hire, mentor, or work closely with transgender colleagues), and follow-up behavioral metrics (e.g. the number of transgender applicants interviewed/hired over the next quarter and treatment of current transgender employees). This study would allow us to test the effectiveness of our intervention in an applied setting with organization buy-in, producing outcomes that are relevant to both academia and the real world.

Our second proposed experiment examines whether calling attention to the colonial roots of transphobia influences everyday kindness towards transgender people. Adapted from Choi, Poertner, and Sambanis (2023), this approach draws on the established use of "helping behaviors" as a measure of discrimination in commonplace social interactions (Bickman and Kamzan 1973, Balafoutas, Nikiforakis, and Rockenbach 2014; Piliavin, Rodin, and Piliavin 1969; West, Whitney, and Schnedler 1975). In this experiment, random passersby would be invited into a building – such as one of Sahodaran's drop-in centers – and asked to take a survey on attitudes towards transgender people. While taking the survey, each respondent would be assigned to either the "treatment group" – in which they would be informed that the survey is part of a project examining the effect of British colonialism on transphobia in India, or the "control group" – in which they would be told nothing about the study's purpose. Afterwards – after the study is ostensibly complete – the respondent would exit the building, where a visibly transgender actor hired by the research team would "accidentally" drop a bag of groceries nearby. The main outcome variable in this study would be the percentage of respondents in the treatment versus control group who help the transgender actor. If significantly more respondents in the treatment than control groups are willing to help the actor, this would be evidence that providing information about the colonial roots of transphobia causes members of the Indian public to behave in more kind ways towards transgender people. This design would help us capture real-world behaviors towards transgender people while avoiding biases associated with self-reports (Blair and Imai 2017).

A third version of this experiment would target landlords specifically. As noted in the interviews, housing discrimination appears to be a primary obstacle for many people in the transgender community, and thus we believe a landlord prejudice reduction experiment would be an impactful place to start. This would be done by randomly providing an informational treatment to landlords, again creating both a treatment and control group, and then following up with an audit study. To start, this would involve scraping contact information for landlords from online rental websites and then randomly assigning them to treatment or control. Treated landlords would receive a WhatsApp message with an infographic describing the colonial history of transphobia in India and a link[6] to learn more information, while the control would receive nothing. Following treatment, we would conduct an audit study, another well-established method of measuring discrimination (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004, Bertrand and Duflo 2016). The audit study would involve creating two identical sets of fictitious application materials, one from a purportedly transgender applicant and one from a purportedly cisgender applicant. Each landlord would be randomly sent one of the two applications. In the control group, we would expect to see the cisgender applicant to receive more callbacks and invitations to view the property than the transgender applicant. However, if the treatment is effective at reducing anti-transgender discrimination, this gap

[6] the link would provide a conservative estimate of treatment uptake

in callback rates and invitations should be smaller in the treated group. Like the other proposed experiments, this study allows us to have clean causal inference about whether historical framing changes real-world behaviors.

Finally, we present a more abstract version of the study which abandons the complications of real-world interventions and simply seeks to identify whether colonial frames shift attitudes on transgender rights and social inclusion in an online survey experiment. This design would be the most straightforward and would only require a large representative sample of the Indian population. Due to the simpler nature of a survey experiment, it would be easier in this context to deploy multiple treatment arms. In this experiment, participants would then be randomized into different conditions: (1) The colonial framing condition which would include a brief vignette describing hijras' historical roles in the precolonial era and the introduction of discriminatory laws under British rule. (2) The modern rights framing condition which would include a brief vignette describing recent legal victories for transgender people. And finally (3) our control condition which would also include a brief vignette but on an unrelated, apolitical topic. Potential outcomes of interest here would include feeling thermometer ratings towards the LGBTQ+ community, agreement with anti-discrimination policies, support for affirmative action or job reservation policies, and willingness to interact with transgender people. This design would provide us with precise estimates for the potential effects of these interventions on the larger population and room for analysis on effectiveness among key demographic subgroups. As noted earlier in this report, there is already a need for a nationally representative survey on the topic of transphobia in India. If such an endeavor were to be funded, this experiment could be embedded within the survey, allowing for maximum efficiency of data collection.

8.2 Barriers and Risks

While we view our proposed interventions as promising, these approaches are not without their own barriers. When we initially pitched the idea of educating people about the colonial roots of transphobia, a number of interviewees expressed doubt about the efficacy of such an approach. Manohar at Sangama lamented that Indian people don't care enough about history for such an intervention to work. Additionally, one of our anonymous interviewees pointed out another potential issue, based on their organization's own experience incorporating historical background into their training, they found that discussing the religious role of transgender people in the precolonial era resulted in complaints. According to the interviewee, incorporating historical lessons in training could still work, but it would need to be approached carefully.

Despite these potential limitations, we believe that the likely benefits are significant. If our colonial framing of transphobia is effective at reducing prejudice, there are a number of actors who could add such framing to their activism and education efforts. NGOs and CBOs could integrate empirically validated colonial-framing techniques into their outreach; government agencies could position transgender rights as part of India's decolonization process, increasing political viability; corporations could adapt DEI training to align inclusion with cultural heritage rather than foreign norms; and school curriculum designers could normalize gender diversity from an early age through historically grounded education.

8.3 Other Interventions to Consider

In addition to our proposed interventions, which are derived from our own research agenda, we would like to highlight additional strategies from the social science literature that merit consideration.

The first is Kalla and Broockman's (2020, 2016) field experiments in the US which demonstrated a compelling method: "non-judgmental exchange of narratives". Their studies found that door-to-door canvassing conversations led to durable reductions in transphobia (and other exclusionary attitudes) for at least four months. In practice, their method involved trained canvassers engaging in empathetic, structured conversations where both parties shared personal stories in a non-judgmental way which fostered deep reflection and perspective-taking among respondents and researchers alike. Kalla and Broockman found that this narrative exchange worked significantly better than simply presenting people with facts and arguments. This proves to be a powerful insight for studies seeking to alter the public's deeply held attitudes.

In the Indian context, this approach could be adapted to CBO-driven interventions where community members and transgender people engage in reciprocal storytelling, potentially in the context of sensitization sessions or workshops. It would be particularly useful in places where people are typically resistant to traditional informational approaches but may be more open to empathetic dialogue.

The second innovative strategy is Duncan Webb's (2024) method of prejudice reduction through horizontal communication among majority-group members. In an experiment conducted in Chennai, Webb found that cisgender people discriminate against transgender people to a significant degree when making hiring decisions, but that this discrimination can be significantly reduced if cisgender people are given time and space to discuss the hiring decision beforehand. Generally, this seems to occur because pro-transgender people are more vocal during the discussion, creating an anti-discriminatory norm that influences the choices of others. Critically, Webb finds that this simple intervention is substantially more effective than simply providing information about transgender people's rights.

We recommend these papers to all who have not yet read them, and recommend that CBOs in India consider implementing these techniques into their sensitization exercises.

8.4 Who Might Benefit

NGOs and CBOs, government policy programs, corporate DEI initiatives, and school curriculum designers all stand to benefit from the findings of this study and the proposed experimental interventions. For NGOs and CBOs such as Sahodaran, PeriFerry, Sangama, and Humsafar Trust, our research provides empirically grounded tools for them to refine their sensitization and community outreach programs. Historical framing, as proposed in this report, can be incorporated into community education sessions, landlord outreach, and employer engagement, giving these organizations a culturally significant narrative to counter stigma and discrimination. Additionally, government agencies in India responsible for social justice, minority affairs, anti-discrimination policies, and teacher training programs can learn from our work as well. Rooting transgender rights in indigenous historical traditions and positioning them as part of the decolonization process may reduce political resistance to new

programs and improve policy uptake.

We also argue that corporate diversity and inclusion training programs can also stand to gain from our research. Many companies are already working with groups like PeriFerry to improve workplace inclusion. Incorporating proven and tested colonial framing modules into their existing training programs could help shift employee perceptions and make transgender inclusion less about "imported" Western HR norms and more about alignment with India's cultural heritage. Finally, groups that design curriculums for schools, universities, and vocational training programs could adapt this work into history and civics lessons, ensuring that students learn about the historical importance of hijras and other gender nonconforming people in Indian society and the colonial policies that sought to erase them. Such integration could help to foster empathy, challenge stereotypes earlier, and contribute to a movement that seeks to change generational attitudes towards transgender and gender nonconforming people more broadly.

8.5 What You Can Do

Reducing discrimination against transgender people in India requires collaboration between different sectors of society – including the NGO/CBO space, government, schools, and researchers. Meaningful change is not achieved through symbolic gestures alone – rather it requires a coordinated grassroots effort to dismantle structural barriers, foster empathy, and create more inclusive public spaces for gender and sexual minorities.

As a reader of this report, we encourage you to support further research into this topic. One way to do this is by donating to research organizations such as the Luskin Center for History and Policy, or supporting other projects that seek to reduce transphobia globally.

Finally, we encourage you to donate directly to NGOs and CBOs working to promote transgender inclusion in India. We would like to shout out one particularly noteworthy cause – Sahodaran's planned construction of a community center for transgender people in Tamil Nadu. We provide a link to their website here for any interested donors who would like to learn more. We believe that any support for organizations like Sahodaran can go a long way towards making India a more inclusive space for people of all gender identities.

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A Robustness Checks for Regression Analysis

We present a number of robustness checks and alternative explanations for our results.

A.1 Homophobia, not transphobia?

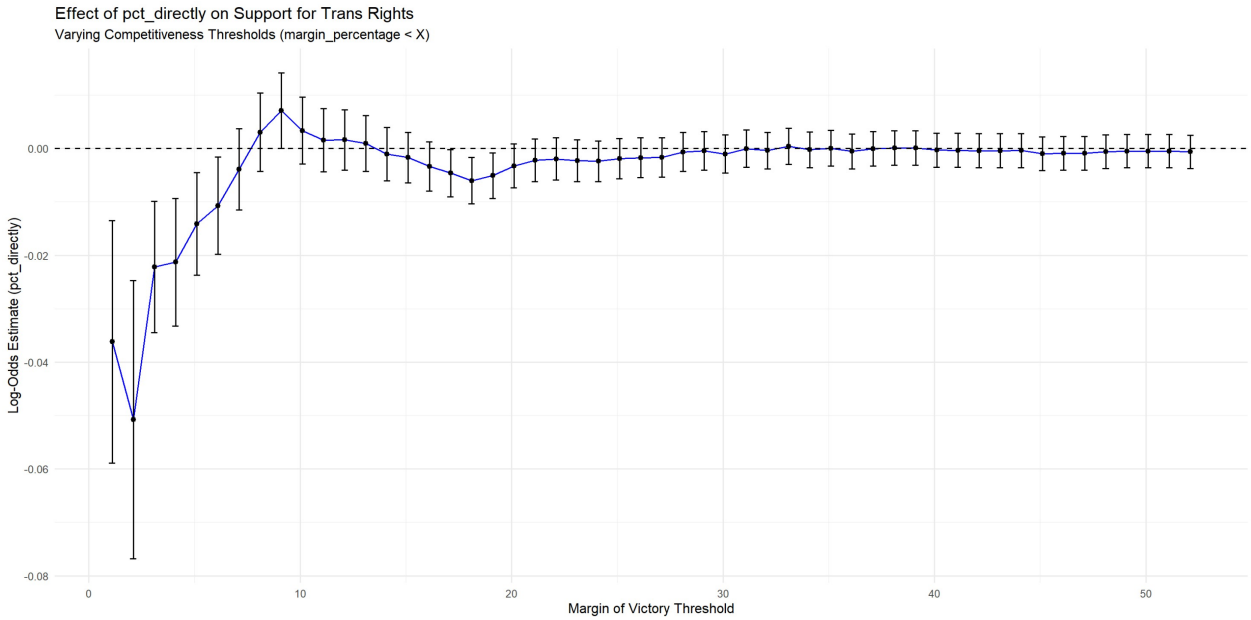

Figure 5: Effect of Direct Colonial Rule in PCs with Margin of Victory $<$ X% (Alternate DV Specification)

The additive measure of transphobia includes seven items rated by Pink List India, which include "Homophobia/Transphobia" and two items measuring stance on Section 377. One might wonder whether this additive measure captures homophobia more closely than transphobia. However, this does not seem to be the case, as the results are robust to alternate specifications of the dependent variable. As shown in Figure 5, the results hold even when we use only the single item that most clearly aligns with transphobia ("Spoke up on Trans Rights") rather than the additive scale.

A.2 Geographic bias?

An alternative explanation is that by removing the less competitive districts, we are removing BJP strongholds in Western India. By removing these PCs, we may be biasing the results in favor of our hypothesis, since many of these areas were indirectly ruled during colonial times but tend to be conservative today. At first glance, this does seem to be an issue. As shown in Figures 6–10, dropping the margin of victory threshold to 20% and 10% disproportionately removes PCs located in Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Madhya Pradesh. One the threshold drops to 5%, virtually all PCs in these provinces are gone. However, the effect size of the direct rule variable continues to grow stronger in absolute terms when the threshold drops further (to 2% and 1%), a result which cannot be explained by the exclusion of the Western regions. Given this, the alternative explanation seems implausible.

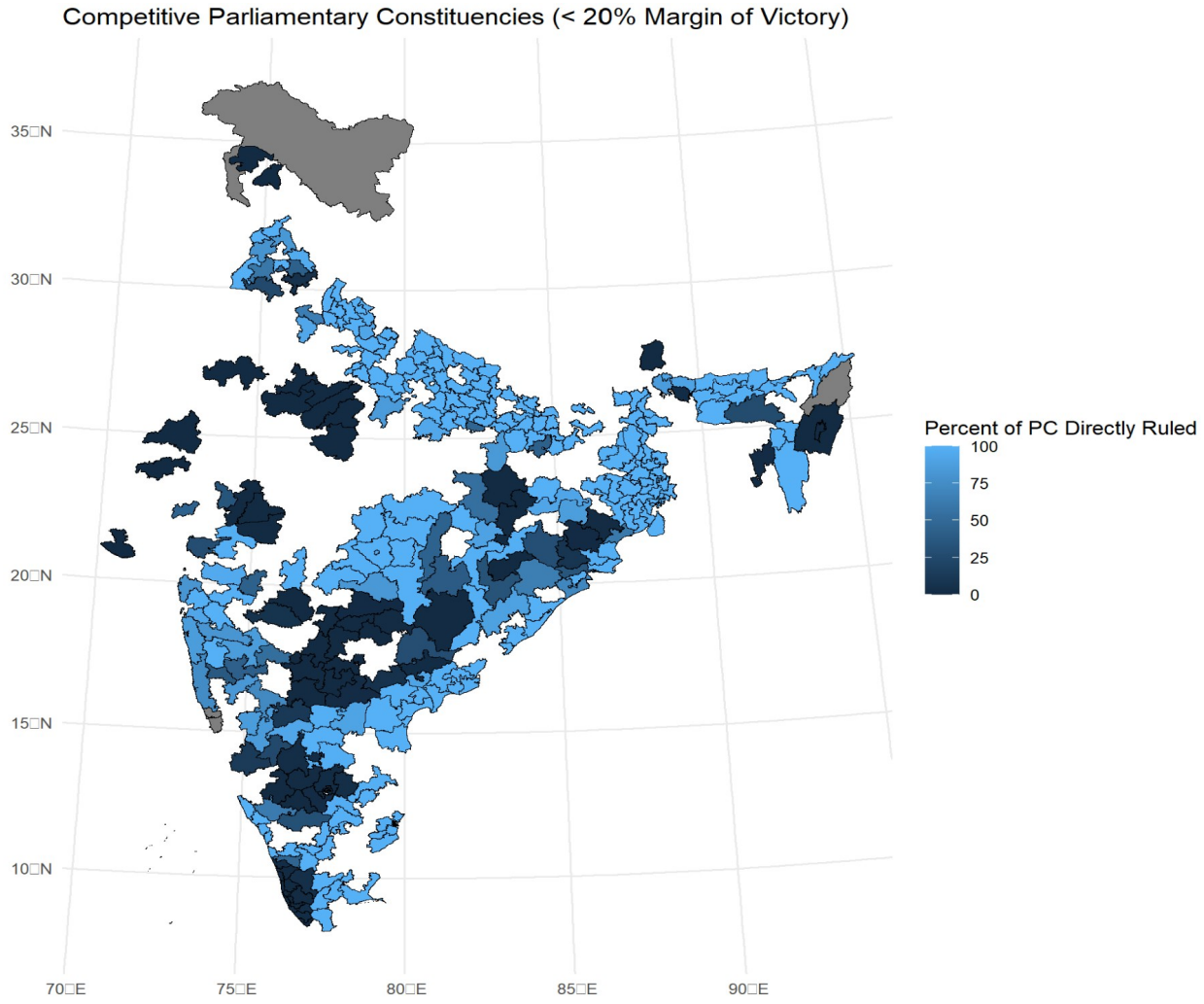

Figure 6: Parliamentary Constituencies with Margin of Victory $< 20\%$

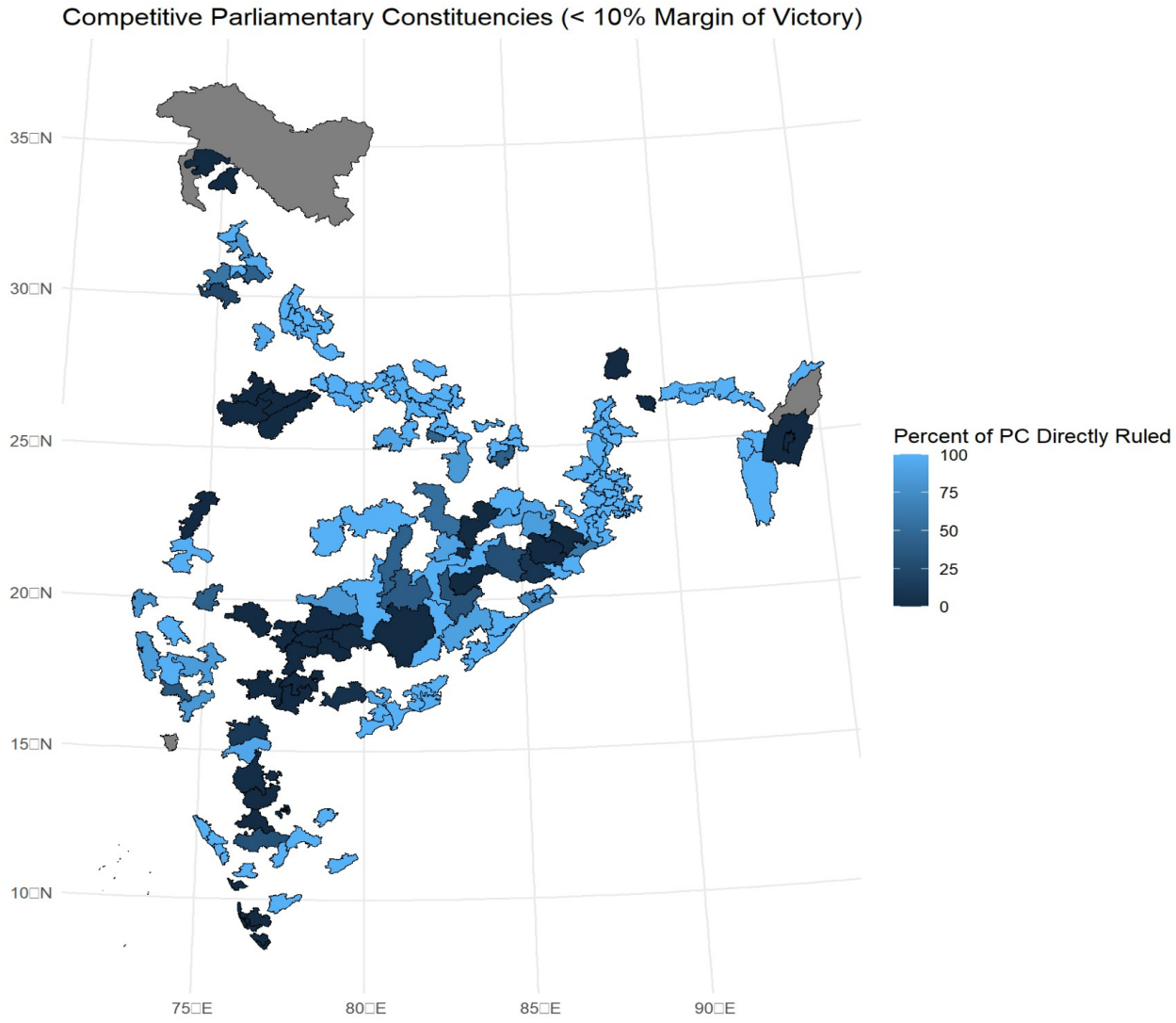

Figure 7: Parliamentary Constituencies with Margin of Victory $< 10\%$

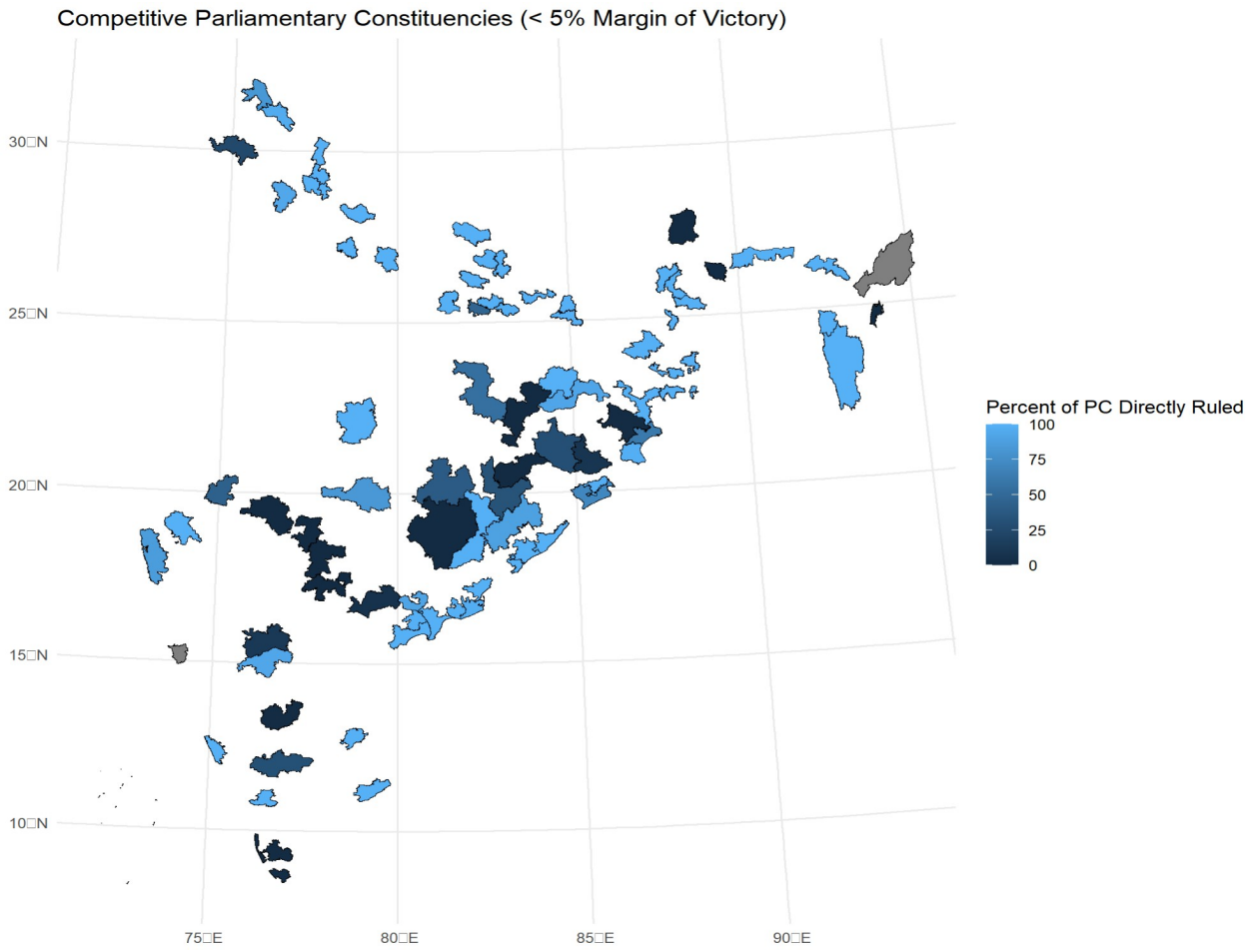

Figure 8: Parliamentary Constituencies with Margin of Victory $< 5\%$

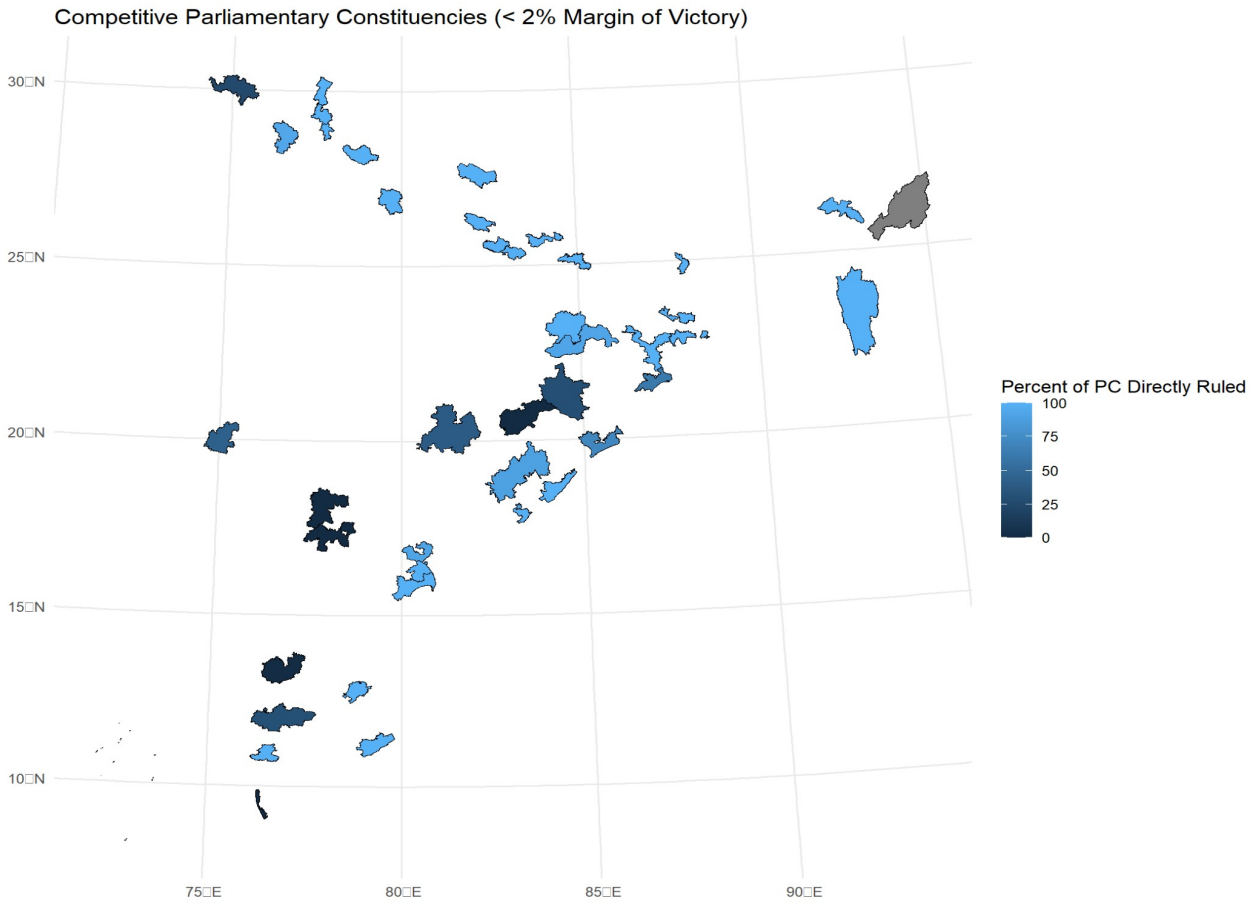

Figure 9: Parliamentary Constituencies with Margin of Victory $< 2\%$

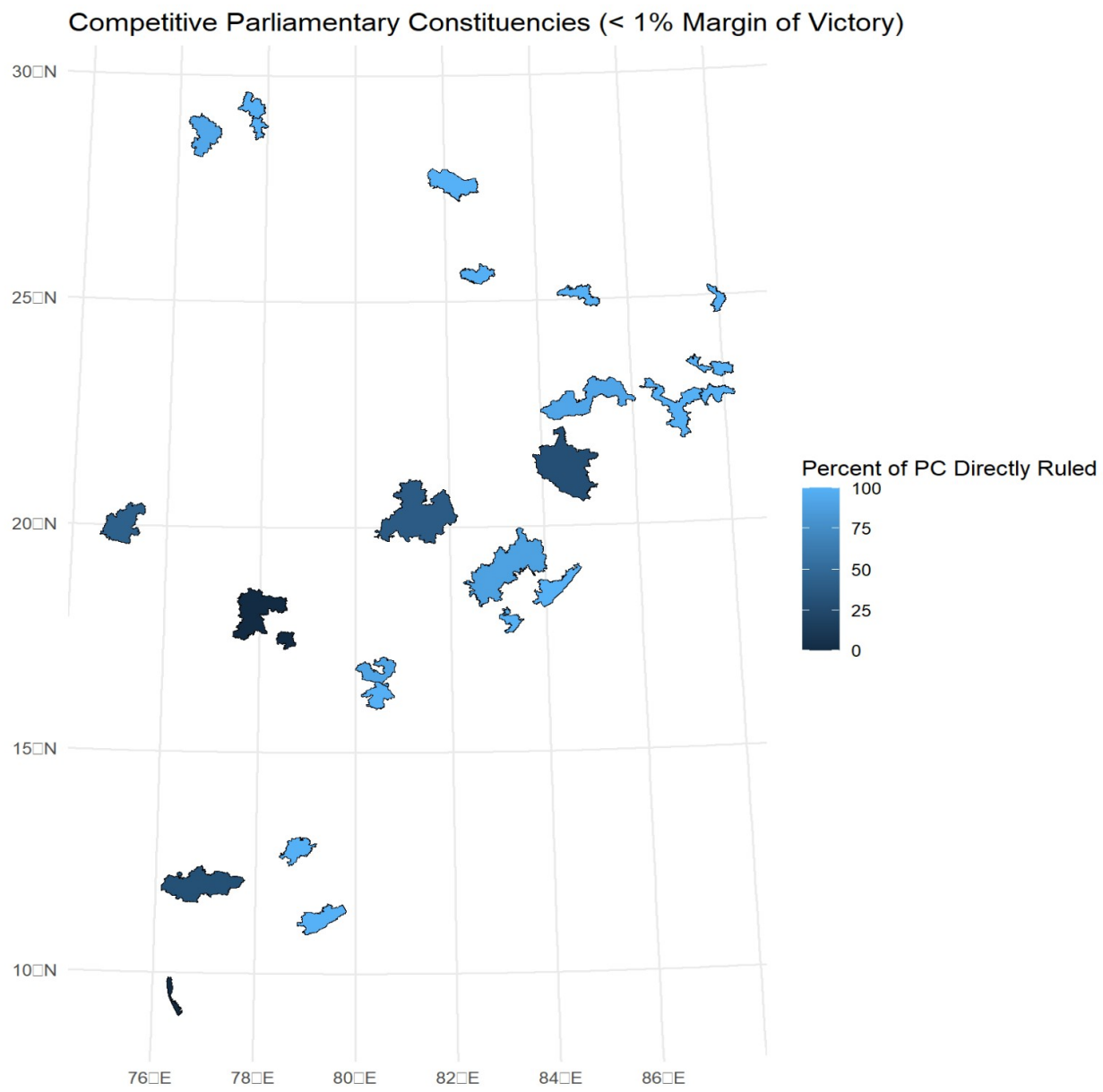

Figure 10: Parliamentary Constituencies with Margin of Victory $< 1\%$

B Full Regression Table

Comparison of Regression Results using Different Margin of Victory Thresholds

	Dependent variable:			
	Support for Trans Rights (Additive)			
	All PCs	Threshold 5%	Threshold 2%	Threshold 1%
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Direct Rule	-0.0001	-0.003	-0.006*	-0.010**
	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.004)
Sex	-0.259**	-0.269	-0.774*	1.845*
	(0.100)	(0.217)	(0.433)	(0.746)
Occupation	-0.006	0.362	0.375	-0.341
	(0.154)	(0.341)	(0.674)	(0.515)
Education	0.212*	0.002	0.181	-0.018
	(0.128)	(0.267)	(0.580)	(0.412)
Incumbent	0.177	0.303	0.388	0.001
	(0.111)	(0.245)	(0.557)	(0.443)
Turncoat	0.175	0.060	-0.185	0.118
	(0.144)	(0.276)	(0.643)	(0.441)
education_num	0.035*	0.039	0.090	0.061
	(0.019)	(0.041)	(0.080)	(0.062)
incumbent	0.038	-0.038	-0.045	0.056
	(0.078)	(0.184)	(0.301)	(0.213)
turncoat	-0.016	-0.311	-0.626	0.202
	(0.154)	(0.335)	(0.522)	(0.438)
party_type_tcpdLocal Party	-0.264	0.326		
	(0.641)	(0.911)		
party_type_tcpdNational Party	0.248	-0.654	-0.031	-0.865
	(0.714)	(1.025)	(1.214)	(1.013)
party_type_tcpdState-based Party	0.254	-0.148	0.325	0.381
	(0.563)	(0.742)	(0.966)	(0.676)
party_type_tcpdState-based Party (Other State)	0.436	0.691	1.007	0.766
	(0.677)	(1.015)	(1.086)	(0.740)
constituency_typeSC	-0.154	-0.285	0.267	0.262
	(0.098)	(0.235)	(0.489)	(0.489)
constituency_typeST	-0.147	-0.288	-0.294	0.176
	(0.128)	(0.239)	(0.370)	(0.304)
pop_density	0.00002**	0.0002**	0.0002	0.0001
	(0.00001)	(0.0001)	(0.0002)	(0.0002)
party_simpleAll India Trinamool Congress	0.184	-1.581	-2.529*	
	(0.618)	(1.074)	(1.450)	
party_simpleBiju Janata Dal	0.931*	-0.257	1.218	
	(0.522)	(0.784)	(1.075)	
party_simpleDravida Munnetra Kazhagam	0.467			
	(0.506)			
party_simpleIndian National Congress	0.683***	-0.018	-0.221	-0.002
	(0.127)	(0.214)	(0.378)	(0.339)
party_simpleJanata Dal (United)	0.315	-0.471	0.208	-0.931
	(0.517)	(1.008)	(1.296)	(0.965)
party_simpleOther	0.322	-0.559	-0.574	-1.007
	(0.455)	(0.688)	(0.837)	(0.616)
party_simpleShiv Sena	-0.106	-0.896		
	(0.507)	(0.991)		
party_simpleYSR Congress Party	0.015	-0.822	-0.459	-0.874
	(0.503)	(0.755)	(1.053)	(0.812)
Constant	2.587***	3.819***	3.469**	2.191
	(0.738)	(1.089)	(1.611)	(1.333)
Observations	503	88	42	24
R^2	0.158	0.268	0.564	0.893
Adjusted R^2	0.116	0.005	0.105	0.383
Residual Std. Error	0.769 (df = 478)	0.639 (df = 64)	0.654 (df = 20)	0.299 (df = 4)
F Statistic	3.739*** (df = 24; 478)	1.017 (df = 23; 64)	1.230 (df = 21; 20)	1.751 (df = 19; 4)
Note:				*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Figure 11: Main Regression Table with All Controls Shown